True Nature

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True Nature

by Caeva

Summary

Will Graham had long since come to terms with his fate – he'd remain unmated for the rest of his life.
He was fine with that. In fact, he preferred it that way. He never asked to be born a male omega. He simply had to make do, despite the unfortunate circumstances. He refused to succumb to his weak nature. The mere idea of it made him feel sick. He just wanted to do his job, despite the nightmares it gave him, and live his life in peace.

Alphas were violent, brutal, cruel beings. Will was doing just fine without them.

Enter Hannibal Lecter.

[Ch 1-19 revised, March 2024]

Notes

Disclaimer: I obviously don't own Hannibal or any of the characters from the 2013 TV series.

Beginnings

Chapter Notes

Major revision completed, March 2024. As of March 24th, chapter 1-19 have been edited. Subsequent chapters (20 and onwards) will not undergo any changes. Those of you who've read this fic before - I hope you'll enjoy this updated version. :)

Also, please note that chapter 1 serves as a sort of introduction to this particular AU. It gets a little explanatory, which isn't everyone's cuppa. Bear with me, yeah?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will Graham had long since come to terms with his fate – he'd remain unmated for the rest of his life.

He was fine with that. Really, he was. In fact, he preferred it that way. For male omegas, there were impediments and barriers in place, which were difficult to circumvent. Like the fact that many alphas opted for *female* omegas given the chance, and Will couldn't really blame them for that. Offspring was something that a lot of people prioritized, after all, and it was something that Will would never be able to offer.

No womb. Low-motility semen. As was the case for most male omegas, Will's chances of ever becoming a parent were slim at best.

It was the sort of thing that made him wonder why nature had allowed their existence to persist, instead of gradually sorting the faulty genes out and eliminating the male omega gender from the human species altogether, considering the complete and utter lack of concrete usefulness.

But then, omegas did only make up roughly ten percent of the population, and only two percent of all omegas were male. In other words, male omegas were indisputably the rarest gender. Perhaps the natural selection was already in process. Give it another millennia or so and the male omega would perhaps be completely extinct.

Will didn't particularly mind omegas in general - he just thought it was unfortunate that he'd been born one.

He'd learned to deal with most of the hazards it entailed. What mostly bothered Will wasn't the biology; children had never been at the top of his priorities anyway. It was how the general public treated male omegas, who typically craved life partners and stability as much as female omegas did. Not that Will was included in that category, but still. Some went suicidal from that longing. Others went into prostitution for an easy buck, even if it resulted

mental and emotional harm - sometimes bodily. Will had heard stories. And he knew how male omega pheromones tended to affect alphas in particular. He knew what made them so keen.

'A sensation akin to being high', was how they'd often describe it. Fucking male omegas in heat.

Will didn't see the appeal.

Not that it was an issue for him. He'd been taking suppressants ever since he entered puberty, and while he still suffered very minor heat symptoms every few months or so, he'd trained himself to ignore those instincts. Arousal was an alien sensation, one that he hardly ever experienced, and Will had never been very interested in sex. Or perhaps it was just the intense reluctance to bend to his innate desires that made it seem so off-putting and foreign to him.

The unfortunate side effect of his suppressant-reliance was that Will was in a constant state of fatigue. This, however, hadn't stopped Will from reaching success in his field. He taught forensics at the FBI and often assisted in investigations, and although his work took a serious toll on him, he thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of being *useful*.

Will took comfort in knowing that he made up for his lack of physical strength with intelligence. He'd also been gifted with a keen sense of empathy, which, as it turned out, came in handy when profiling serial killers. He knew precisely how to enter the state of mind that allowed him to not just think like a serial killer, but to *feel* like one as well. It was unsettling on many levels, but it hadn't been a problem. That is, until recently.

Entering the mind of a killer wasn't an issue – it was *exiting* that had gradually become alarmingly difficult. Will couldn't remember the last time he'd slept a full night without waking up from nightmares, bathing in his own cold sweat. When he'd told Jack Crawford, alpha and BSU higher-up, what he was going through, the man had simply shrugged it off and told him that it wasn't uncommon for agents to experience nightmares, that it was an occupational hazard, and that it was likely to pass.

After that, Will hadn't worried - until he started having hallucinations during the days.

A minor little detail that he hadn't been as keen to share with the chief.

Still, Will had hoped it was just like the nightmares; that it'd pass and he'd soon be fully sane again. If the other agents could handle it, then by God, so could he. He had to. He'd hidden the fact that he was an omega ever since he'd first started working for the BSU, and he feared that if he was forced to undergo a medical examination, his true gender would inevitably be exposed.

It certainly wasn't prohibited for omegas to work, but he was fairly certain that people would look at him differently if they knew that he wasn't actually a beta. Some might even question his capability as an agent.

Despite the modern societal climate and the expanding political correctness, Will was fairly convinced that omegas were still first and foremost perceived as sensual little playthings; male omegas especially so. He couldn't risk exposing himself to people he hardly knew. Especially since the majority of his co-workers consisted of alphas. Which was fucking typical, really.

And if Will had to be honest, he'd sooner sacrifice his sanity than have his dignity ripped from him.

Which was why it had irritated him that Alana Bloom, beautiful beta, successful psychologist and one of the very few people in the world that Will considered his friends, had alerted Crawford of his wavering state of mind after catching Will teaching a class to an empty room, thinking that it was full of students.

Will had slept very little that week and even he had to admit that things were perhaps going a bit too far if he was hallucinating an entire auditorium full of people, but he still felt bitterly betrayed.

She was, of course, worried for his wellbeing. He knew that. Couldn't stay angry with her. He just wished she'd talked to him first. Because after her interference, in an effort to ensure that Will remained useful, Crawford had assigned a psychiatrist to *observe* Will. Initially under the guise of assisting with cases, probably because Crawford knew how much Will despised the idea of being psycho-analysed, but Will saw through it almost immediately.

Hannibal Lecter *was* going to assist with cases, yes – but his primary job was to watch Will and make sure his head stayed intact. Will had protested, of course, to absolutely no avail. Lecter was not just a psychiatrist – he was also an alpha, and a very imposing one at that. Tall, broad shoulders, articulate, irritatingly aware of his own intelligence, and the tone of his voice was as calm as it was firm. Everything about him made Will uncomfortable.

Will tended to avoid meeting people's gazes as a means to keep his instincts at bay – eyes were distracting and, worse yet, they had the frightening ability to convey attraction – but with Lecter it was different. Will felt as though it'd be downright *dangerous* to meet his gaze. So he didn't. Hadn't.

Until one morning, Will was woken up by knocks at his door and he, already sleep deprived and cranky as hell, responded to the rude awakening by tearing the front door open and snarling out an angry-

"*What?*"

He found himself staring straight into Hannibal Lecter's intense brown eyes for several shocked seconds before finally lowering his gaze, feeling as though he'd just been seen naked.

"Sorry, I didn't know it was you." He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms over his chest, uncomfortably aware of the fact that he was only dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. "What are you doing here?"

Lecter didn’t seem put off. He held up a bag that carried the pleasant aroma of warm food.

“I made you breakfast.”

Will couldn’t help but to send Lecter a confused scowl.

“Breakfast?”

“Yes,” he said with a polite smile, “typically known as the first meal of the day. Your surprised tone indicates you rarely eat breakfast, meaning I was correct in my assumption. So I made you some. May I come in?”

Will nodded without a word and disappeared into his cabin to collect his bathrobe. Once he’d covered himself up, he rejoined Lecter in the kitchen, where the man was already setting up the table. Will marveled at the scent emitting from the food containers that Lecter placed in front of him and felt his mouth begin to water.

“What is it?” Will asked and peered curiously into the bowl. “Sausage?”

“Homemade.”

“Impressive. My culinary skills are limited to having memorized the Hardee's menu. I like their cheese burgers," Will gave a crooked smile in an effort to be polite, seeing as Lecter had gone out of his way to make Will breakfast. "But this looks great. I hope it wasn't a bother.”

“Cooking is never a bother,” stated Lecter and watched patiently as Will took his first bite. “Well?”

“It’s delicious. Thank you,” Will said and sent Lecter a quick glance, only to immediately drop his gaze once more, focusing instead on the food. It really was delicious. The sausages were smokey in their flavor and made from a meat that Will couldn’t quite place, but it reminded him of pork. Along with the sausages, there were fried eggs and buttery bread. Lecter had indeed been correct in his assumption – Will rarely had the time or the energy to eat breakfast in the mornings, opting instead to drink copious amounts of coffee on his way to work. It woke him up alright, but it also made him jittery and suffering gruesome headaches.

With proper food in his system, Will found his energy replenishing faster than it normally did. Gratitude swelled in his chest. But the random act of kindness still had him suspicious. Lecter was meant to observe him, that much he understood, but bringing him breakfast? That was teetering on inappropriate.

“Is this going to be a regular thing with you? Bringing me food, that is?” Will tried to keep his tone light, but Lecter saw through it. He smiled gently.

“Not if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Not uncomfortable,” Will lied and shrugged. “It’s just a bit…”

“Intrusive?”

Will looked up, suddenly worried that Lecter had taken offense to his ungrateful attitude, but Lecter merely reached for his glass of water, calmly taking a sip. Will gave a grimace and looked down once more, stabbing a piece of egg with his fork.

“I didn’t mean-“

“Don’t worry, I know how it comes across.” Lecter’s voice carried the trace of a chuckle, which made Will relax a little. “Let me assure you, I don’t normally do this for my patients, but then again, you seem different from my ‘normal patients.’ It’s intriguing. I think you and I could have a more profound relationship.”

Will froze with his fork half-way to his mouth, trying to ignore the wave of dread that crashed over him at what the man was suggesting. Lecter didn’t wait for him to work up a reply.

“That is, I was hoping we could be friends.”

Will took a steadying breath, relieved at the clarification, and shoved the fork into his mouth, desperately hoping that Lecter hadn’t noticed his discomfort. Vexation still got the best of him.

“... I don’t find you that interesting,” Will muttered, suddenly keen on keeping the doctor at a distance. Lecter didn’t seem to care.

“You will.”

Hannibal Lecter had never really considered the notion of finding a lifelong partner. It was expected of him, as it was of alphas, and he wasn’t *against* the idea, per se. Being what and who he was, he was rather accustomed to betas and omegas throwing longing glances after him as he passed them on the street, and never particularly worried about his prospects.

Of course, an omega would be preferable – in part because there was traditional and social value to being an **α** and **Ω** pair, but also because Hannibal found omegas to be vastly more fascinating than betas. Not to mention, *rare*. Hannibal liked rarities.

Unfortunately, however, with alphas making up twenty percent of the population while omegas only made up ten, the frustrating reality was that many alphas would never get to mate permanently with an omega.

Hannibal had had his fair share of sexual encounters in his lifetime. Mostly betas, but there you go. He’d had the pleasure of spending a night or two with an omega at his side, but never during a heat, and he’d never granted anyone – beta or omega – his bite. No, for Hannibal to

actually *mark* his mate, thus claiming him or her as his life partner, it would have to be someone truly special. Someone who understood him – if such a creature existed. He was starting to doubt that. Gradually, over time, he'd come to accept the idea that perhaps he'd settle for someone who was, at the very least, pliable. Someone he could mold, and shape into something that at least *resembled* what he craved.

But for the time being, he was in no rush.

Hannibal was what he was – a psychiatrist, a socialite, a hunter. He had enough on his plate, literally speaking, and remaining single and on the prowl was a lifestyle that suited him well. As did maintaining a healthy distance to most other people. Hannibal rarely let anyone catch even so much as a glimpse of who he truly was, but those who *had* made the mistake of looking too closely at him, inevitably ended up on Hannibal's dinner table. It was just too troublesome.

He kept people at bay. Impersonal glamour his armour. He maintained his charade flawlessly. It had been perfected over time. No one suspected that anything at all was amiss. Exactly the way he liked it.

And so, the fact that Will Graham still refused to meet his gaze for more than a second at a time shouldn't have bothered him as much as it did.

Hannibal had that effect on many people, given his naturally formidable aura, and he'd never considered it a problem. In fact, Hannibal rather enjoyed the respect and the awe that he inspired in others. He fed on that energy until it filled him up and, sometimes, made him want to feed on their flesh, too.

He couldn't for the life of him figure out why Will Graham's reluctance to look at him frustrated him so. Will was a rather ordinary-looking beta. Nothing about him stood out. He had bad posture. His skin was so pale it almost looked grey. He clearly didn't know how to use a comb. And he was very skittish. All qualities that Hannibal rather disliked.

Truthfully, Will was everything that Hannibal *didn't* look for in a partner – or even a friend for that matter. And yet.

"Will."

No answer. Hannibal crouched down to get a better look on the younger man's face. Will was seated on the sidewalk, staring blankly ahead. The blood splatter on his cheek had dried and darkened, making it resemble ink.

Behind them, the house in which Will had just been forced to shoot Garrett Jacob Hobbs was surrounded by police officers and forensic investigators, while the blue flashing lights from several police cars and ambulances swivelled through the air, casting dancing shadows.

"Will?" Hannibal pressed and placed a hand on the man's shuddering shoulder.

The only response Will gave was a twitch in his fingers, a quick inhale. Hannibal scowled

slightly, irritated with the man's lacking response. Hannibal wouldn't stand for being ignored, even when it wasn't done on purpose.

"*William*," he said, using a tone that he normally reserved for a select few. "Look at me."

Finally, Will seemed to snap out of his shock and slowly turned his head to look at him. It nearly startled Hannibal when Will's impossibly wide eyes met his, because for the first time since they'd met, Will didn't look away. He looked straight into Hannibal's, unblinking, pupils mere pinpricks. Clearly still in shock, then.

"You had no choice, Will. You know that."

Will said nothing. His intense stare seemed to convey something other than fear or shock, Hannibal realized. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. There was something like a request in those blue eyes. A desperate request.

No. Commanding. He's commanding *something from me. Commanding* what*?*

"He's dead," Will finally mumbled, looking as though he wanted to vomit. "I killed him. I… *killed* a man." Shaking hands reached out and tugged at Hannibal's coat. Hannibal pulled the other man off the ground and Will stumbled slightly before he turned to look straight into Hannibal's eyes. The shock in the pale blue was only trumped by the sheer horror of what had just taken place. Still, it was with an unnerving level of calm that Will spoke next, voice trembling ever so slightly. "What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

Hannibal could only stare back at Will. Those wide eyes. The pain in them. And that goddamned unspoken command. Hannibal's chest gave an odd twinge at the sight. Almost as if…

Hannibal nearly flinched back when it suddenly occurred to him. Will seemed to lose the strength in his legs and sank down to his knees, where he remained, folding in on himself as though he was trying to keep himself from blowing up. Hannibal noted the way Will's breathing picked up pace, until the younger man was on the verge of hyperventilating.

Before he could make any further attempts at calming Will down, a pair of paramedics rushed past him and immediately attended to Will. They draped a blanket around Will before proceeding to calm him down, eventually coaxing the panicked young man into their ambulance. Hannibal backed away from them, too deep in thought to be of any assistance anyway, and covered his mouth with a gloved hand.

Could it be?

Jack Crawford suddenly appeared by his side, looking oddly sombre.

"Are you worried about him, doctor Lecter?" He asked, nodding towards the ambulance where Will was resting up.

"He's in severe shock," Hannibal commented and put his hands in his pockets, adopting a

more relaxed stance. “I’m in charge of assessing his mental well-being, so of course seeing him in this state worries me.”

“I don’t blame you,” Jack said, frowning bitterly. “I’m worried, too. Will has never killed anyone on the job before. I didn’t think he had it in him. You know about his previous work, right? He used to be a homicide detective.”

“Yes, I read the file. He lost his job because he repeatedly failed to draw his gun, no?”

Jack nodded, expression tense.

“His reluctance to using his weapon, even in dire situations, endangered his missions and his co-workers, so they let him go. That’s when we snatched him up to teach our future agents… And then he started working cases with us. Solved a lot of them, too. But sometimes I wonder why he’s in this line of work, considering how it affects him.” He turned to Hannibal with a quirked eyebrow. “Don’t get me wrong - his special abilities make him an *excellent* investigator. It’s precisely why I want him on my team. But what happened today... it may have been too much for him. He’s fragile, for a beta.”

Hannibal said nothing. Felt it was best not to, because unlike Crawford, he didn’t feel it was a shame at all. He’d orchestrated this, after all. Not only to help out a fellow hunter – because that was only a small bonus – but because he wanted to see how Will would react to the ensuing chaos; he'd wanted to see what the man would do. Hannibal knew from the very moment Hobbs hung up the phone on him that the man would panic and do something unnecessarily drastic, realizing that he was about to get caught. Hannibal had expected this, because that’s what most hunters did when faced with the prospect of getting caught.

He hadn’t, however, expected Will to be strong enough to pull the trigger.

Hobbs being willing to cut the throat of his own daughter had been the deciding factor. The idiot had forced Will’s hand the moment his blade slid across her throat, blood spraying everywhere. That had apparently been the last straw for Will – it was where he drew the line for what someone could get away with right before his eyes. Taking an innocent life.

The girl hadn’t died, however, for which Hannibal was unusually glad. If Will was this torn up over killing an infamously violent serial killer, Hannibal had to wonder how Will would’ve reacted if Abigail Hobbs *had* in fact passed away from her wounds – if Will hadn’t been able to save her, and his execution of Hobbs had come too little too late. Perhaps he would’ve lost his mind completely. Hannibal didn’t know Will Graham well enough yet, but perhaps Jack was right: Will was fragile.

But fragility wasn’t always a synonym to weakness.

Hannibal smiled softly to himself and turned away from the house, the police cars and the stench of stress, fear and death in the air. His car was parked just down the road and since Will would likely be taken to the hospital before being sent home, Hannibal decided to retreat for the night. There was no need to rush things.

He’d have plenty of time to get to know Will Graham better from now on.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Therapy

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Major revision in progress. (March, 2024)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight days had passed. It was Tuesday and a fairly grey one at that. Will watched as the raindrops that hit his kitchen window trickled down, fusing with each other to form watery threads across the glass.

The cup of coffee he'd made for himself twenty minutes earlier was still untouched and he suspected it was probably already too cool to be enjoyable. With a heavy sigh, Will got up from the chair, its legs scraping against the floor. He grabbed the blue cup and made his way over to the sink to pour the stale coffee out before heading to the bathroom.

Not even caffeine appealed to him. The mere thought of ingesting anything – liquid or solid – was enough to make him feel sick. He blamed it on nerves.

Today was not going to be a good day. In fact, he'd been dreading it even since the week prior.

Killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs had, despite his best efforts to stay calm, hurled him straight into an erratic panic attack. It had taken the paramedics nearly two hours to subdue him, and when his anxiety returned full-force at the hospital later that night, the doctor had given him strict orders to take time off from work. At least for a few days. To gather himself. Rest. Come to terms.

"Preferably with the help of therapy, once you're strong enough."

How convenient then, he thought dryly, that a psychiatrist was already appointed to him.

Will scoffed and shoved his toothbrush into his mouth, aggressively moving it around as memories from last week flashed before his inner vision.

He was ashamed of himself.

He'd known right from the start that his job as an FBI investigator could potentially lead to having to take another person's life. He'd *known*. He was issued a goddamned gun. He knew how to use it. He'd spent countless hours practicing his shots. They weren't perfect, but they were good enough, and his certificate had made him feel confident – like he was prepared for

anything.

But he hadn't been prepared at all.

Will bent over the sink to spit. As always, tiny specks of blood were mixed in with the white foam. His gums ached. He turned on the tap and rinsed his mouth. Straightened up. Glared at himself in the mirror.

Will was so very ashamed of himself.

None of the other agents would've reacted that strongly. Even first-timers maintained a sense of calm – at least on the outside. Will had seen agents take down criminals and not even flinch. Agents who remained focused, stone-cold, professional, even when faced with ugly death. It was their job.

But Will, the genius profiler and forensics expert, had completely lost his shit. Lost every ounce of composure, like a goddamned child.

No. Like a goddamned omega.

He closed his eyes, pressed the heels of his palms against his lids as salt began to sting behind them and took a slow breath. And then another one. And another one. Until his chest stopped aching and his head stopped spinning.

Hating himself would have to wait. For now, he needed to get dressed and head into town. His first therapy session with Hannibal Lecter would be starting in less than an hour and Will didn't want to show up late. It was bad enough that Lecter had been there that night, witnessing Will's undignified reaction to the whole ordeal. Will had *clung* to him in some sort of effort to retain whatever composure he had left at the time, and the memory of that made Will's face heat up from humiliation. The thought of seeing Lecter again made him cringe in discomfort.

Whatever façade of capability that Will had hoped to maintain in front of the psychiatrist had crumbled right there on the sidewalk, and now, he was forced to go to actual *sessions*. Simply being under observation was no longer the issue – active therapy was now obligatory.

Every Tuesday and Friday, until Lecter deemed him stable enough to go back to work. If he refused to attend these sessions, Jack would have no choice but to suspend him – *indefinitely*. Will couldn't have that. No, he'd go, and he'd prove to Lecter that he was more than capable of doing his job.

As he got dressed, Will wondered what he should say to Lecter once they met again. He desperately wanted to make a more serene, put-together impression this time. Wanted the man to know that he was far from the mess he'd seen that night; that he was stronger than that. Wanted to somehow convince him that that night had been a fluke – an exception to the rule. A one time thing. But how? What could he possibly say?

"Seeing her throat cut open must've flipped a switch in me," Will said to his own reflection

in the bathroom mirror as he buttoned his shirt, briefly attempting a smile, but stopped immediately as he realized that the topic didn't really call for smiling. Instead, he opted for a more serious look. "I just wasn't prepared. I never thought he'd go so far as to try and kill his own daughter. Witnessing her near-death made me react... in a surprising manner. But I'm okay now. I'm... okay now." Will trailed off, sighing heavily as he realized that Lecter probably wouldn't buy it. Heck, Will couldn't even convince himself.

The bitter truth, though he still found it difficult to come to terms with, was that Will's strong reaction was probably linked to his gender.

Omegas weren't meant to take lives. Hell, if anything, they were meant to produce them. Male omegas lacked the required anatomy, sure, but they still had the instincts.

Ironically, those very instincts were what had led to Will joining the police force in the first place. He'd felt that if he couldn't *create* life, the way his female counterparts could, then he could at least try to *save* lives.

Sadly, however, Will had encountered far more death than salvation in his line of duty. It followed him home. Corrupted him. Gave him nightmares. It had been that way from the start. Maybe he'd been naïve, thinking that he could go on that way forever.

It was possible that he'd pushed himself too far this time. Perhaps he'd crossed a line the instant he pulled that trigger. No matter how many pills he took or how much self-restraining meditation he did, he'd never be able to change what he was. He'd defied his very nature by taking Hobbs' life. No wonder he was a mess. Killing just wasn't in his blood.

But then, why…

Will paused with his hands hovering over his necktie and gazed into the mirror. Searched his own eyes for any traces of the shadows he felt lurking just beyond the surface. He saw none. The soft blue of his irises was as innocent as the sky.

He shook his head and proceeded to tie the silky fabric into a knot that was far from perfect, but completely passable. It looked neat. Lecter seemed fond of neatness. His neckties were always impeccably tied, iron-coloured hair always in perfect place, and he wore three piece suits on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, Will often went to work with his collar unbuttoned, wearing ill-fitting pants and with his hair sticking out in unruly angles. To put it bluntly, he was the opposite of Hannibal Lecter in every way imaginable. It was almost amusing how starkly they contrasted one another. And the man had claimed to want to befriend him. Who was the crazy one, really?

Since Will wanted to make a better impression on Lecter – possibly improving his chances of going back to work soon – he decided to spend a few minutes extra on his appearance that morning. Showing up looking like he just rolled out of bed wouldn't help his case.

Will rarely invested time or money into his looks. Beautifying rituals were utterly redundant, seeing as Will was perfectly happy being unappealing. That wasn't to say, however, that Will

didn't know how to polish himself up and look representable when he needed to.

First, he trimmed his beard. Shaving it off completely was out of the question, but he didn't mind trimming it a bit, just enough to make sure it didn't look scruffy. Then, he gently scrubbed his face with a warm, damp towel to achieve a rosier hue, well aware of how sickly his complexion normally looked. He then proceeded to drag a rarely used brush through his brown locks until he'd created a nice side parting. It didn't look nearly as glamorous as Lecter's slicked back hair did, but he did look much more put together this way.

Finally, Will sprayed himself generously with his preferred cologne, which carried the scent of sandalwood.

Améliorer was a Canadian brand that produced pheromone enhancing body sprays, perfumes and aftershaves primarily for betas. Many betas suffered from weak pheromones and had difficulties finding mates because of it. *Améliorer* added a nice fragrance, while simultaneously enhancing the beta's own pheromones, allowing for more successful romantic pursuits.

As it happened, these specific scent enhancers also worked wonders for *blocking* omega pheromones, which worked out well for Will. The cologne was his armor; it made him invisible and it made him feel safe. Combined with his daily dose of suppressants, the cologne blocking his natural scent made it damned near impossible to see through his guise.

He regarded himself in the mirror for a second before sighing with contentment, his refreshed appearance having a strangely positive impact on his mood.

I can do this.

He popped a mint into his mouth and grabbed his car keys, said good bye to the group of dogs currently resting by the fireplace, and left.

As soon as Will took his first step off the porch and started making his way to his car, a violent gush of wind slammed into him and messed up his combed hair. He then proceeded to step in a puddle of cold, muddy rainwater. Once he finally reached his car, water had already seeped through the soles of his shoes, wetting his toes. Finally, he dropped his keys in the mud next to the car.

Will stared down at them in contempt for a second before bending down to retrieve them. The mud made its way in under his fingernails and he had no choice but to wipe his hand on the side of his jacket.

He flung open the door to the driver's seat, hopped in and slammed the door shut. He sat in total silence for almost a full minute, resisting the urge to punch the steering wheel, before putting the keys into the ignition.

Once he was on the road, Will finally opened his mouth to let out a string of the most extreme profanity he could think of. It helped alleviate some of his irritation, but his good mood and confidence from earlier had completely abandoned him. As if on cue, the rainfall intensified

and Will realized he'd neglected to bring an umbrella.

For the duration of the trip into town, he merely focused on driving.

No. Today was not going to be a good day.

It took every ounce of self-restraint that Hannibal had in him to not grimace in disgust as his patient, a thirty-four year old beta named Franklyn, noisily emptied the contents of his nose into the tissue that Hannibal had offered him.

The man suffered from high neuroticism and was prone to crying due to his fate. Neuroticism could never be cured - only *managed* - since it was a personality trait rather than a concrete disorder. There were measures one could take to loosen the neuroticism's grip on the patient, allowing for them to lead a more or less normal life – whatever that meant.

Unfortunately for Hannibal, one of the most effective ways to counsel someone who suffered from high neuroticism was to *talk* about the patient's feelings – over and over again – until the patient came to terms with them.

Franklyn, who had already seen several psychiatrists before he was handed over to Hannibal, was sadly not very receptive to this kind of therapy. Though the man certainly did enjoy talking, he was constantly talking about the *wrong things*, despite Hannibal's efforts to keep the man on track, only to eventually end up crying over his unfortunate, unrelenting state of mind.

Hannibal caught himself checking his wrist watch much more frequently than he usually would; Franklyn's voice reduced to white noise in the background as Hannibal counted down the minutes.

Will Graham would soon be there; he'd be sitting in the chair currently occupied by the heaving beta, having his first actual session with Hannibal. Unlike Franklyn, Will was the kind of patient that Hannibal genuinely looked forward to analysing.

Putting Will's incredible aptitude for empathy aside, Hannibal sensed that Will was weighed down by more than that – there were shadows lurking beneath the bland surface, and Hannibal wanted to lure them out of him. Wanted to see what kind of darkness existed within the young profiler - wanted to see if it matched his own.

But most importantly, Hannibal had a specific theory regarding Will's identity that he wanted to confirm. He couldn't be certain of it yet, and he wasn't going to confront the young man about it until he was.

"-hate being this neurotic!" Franklyn sobbed, burying his glistening face in his palms. Hannibal shifted his focus back to the patient and let out a sigh.

“If you weren’t, you’d be something much worse, Franklyn,” he gave a reassuring smile. “You’ve done excellent progress.” Well, that was a stretch, but with neurotic patients – who tended to get anxious very easily – stretches were sometimes necessary.

The timer he’d set on his phone rang and Hannibal stood, straightening his tie in the process.

“That’s all the time we have today,” he said, bracing himself for the protests he knew were coming. Franklyn sent him a disappointed look and swiftly wiped his teary cheeks with the same tissue he’d used to blow his nose earlier. It was nauseating to behold.

“Every time our sessions end, I feel like you can’t get rid of me faster,” he complained. “Am I really that much of a nuisance to you?”

“Of course not,” Hannibal lied, keeping his smile soft enough to be friendly, yet steely enough to be firm. “But I have other patients to attend. You know that.”

“But-“

A series of tentative knocks interrupted Franklyn, who sent an indignant glare towards the door that led to the waiting room. Hannibal couldn’t help the surge of exhilaration that coursed through him.

Finally.

“We’re done for today Franklyn. I’ll see you again next week.”

Franklyn frowned bitterly as he headed to the door and reached out a hand to open it, but Hannibal beat him to it. The beta sent him a confused look, which Hannibal chose to ignore completely. The door swung open to reveal a rather dishevelled Will Graham.

The younger man was clearly not as happy to see him. His hair was soaked from the heavy rain outside, the upper part of his coat was glittering from the raindrops that clung to the fabric, and his shoes were covered in mud. His tense shoulders were trembling - shivering from the cold, no doubt. All in all, he looked a mess. Hannibal quirked an eyebrow at him.

“You should have brought an umbrella.”

Will’s upper lip twitched in irritation, as if Hannibal had just touched a nerve.

“That’s very astute of you, doctor,” he muttered and walked past Hannibal into the study without waiting for an invitation. Franklyn followed Will with his gaze, looking as though he’d just been forced to eat a raw lemon.

“What a rude guy,” he commented, voice hushed, and sent Hannibal a look, clearly hoping for Hannibal's alliance. “I feel kind of bad leaving you with him.”

“Well,” Hannibal said, smiling pleasantly at the beta. “I’m sure I’ll manage.”

He then proceeded to close the door in Franklyn's face, giving the man no further opportunity to argue, and headed back into his study, where Will was waiting for him. The younger man was standing in the middle of the room with his dripping coat tucked under his arm.

"There's a coat hanger right over there," Hannibal said and gestured to the glossy pole designed to resemble a tree behind his desk. Will said nothing as he walked over there to hang his coat on one of the curved branches before turning back to Hannibal with a guarded expression.

"Well?"

"Let's begin," Hannibal said and took a seat in his chair, stretching his hand out towards the one placed across from him. "Please, take a seat."

Will did as he was told. He sat with a straight back, hands placed neatly on the arms of the chair, looking as though he was about to get electrocuted. His facial expression was reluctant and grim. Hannibal felt the corners of his mouth twitch in amusement.

He really doesn't want to be here, does he?

"How have you been?" He asked and crossed his legs, bringing his fingertips together as he awaited Will's response. The younger man lifted one eyebrow at him.

"Swell. You?"

"We're not meant to focus on me, Will."

"Just making small talk," Will retorted, his gaze wandering all over Hannibal's study. "Let's get this over and done with. I want to go back to work as soon as possible, so I'll be cooperative. Though you should know I'm here under vehement protest."

"Jack Crawford seems to share your sentiments," Hannibal commented. "He was displeased with this arrangement."

"And yet, here I am," Will said with a dry smile. "Just waiting to be shrunk."

"For what it's worth, I'm glad you came - even if it's under protest."

Will looked unsure for a moment before his stiff back seemed to ease back into the chair a bit. Keeping his gaze firmly on the floor, Will started drumming his fingers against the armrests.

"I'll admit I've been… feeling a bit off lately."

"How so?"

Will's gaze flickered up to meet his for a brief second before dwindling down to the floor once more. He hesitated for a few moments before clearing his throat.

“You know about my hallucinations, right?” Will said and crossed his arms defensively over his chest. “I mean, that’s why they brought you in in the first place.”

“Correct. Are you saying they’ve been getting worse?”

“Not exactly, it’s just… they've *changed*,” Will sighed and turned his gaze towards the tall windows. Uncrossed his arms to resume the tapping of his fingers against the arm rest. The rain tracks on the glass cast odd shadows on Will’s face, almost making it look like he was crying. “All I see is him.”

“… Hobbs?”

Will nodded, still facing the windows. The drumming of his fingers intensified.

“I see him in my dreams. And sometimes when I’m awake.”

“Does he appear to be alive? Or do you see him as a corpse?”

Will let out a shuddering laugh and brought his left hand up to rub at his cheek – probably just to have something to do with his hands. Difficulties sitting still was common amongst those who suffered from trauma.

“Both, I’d say. He appears as a rotting corpse, but he… he *talks* to me. Mocks me. And he's not even that clever about it.”

Hannibal narrowed his eyes, scanning the man’s appearance and body language. Will was clearly trying to act calm, putting on a brave but undeniably fake smile. Hannibal could tell that he found the ordeal disturbing. Not that he could blame him.

“Your reaction to ending Hobbs’ life that night was very strong,” he pointed out and took notice of how Will immediately tensed up. “Is that something that bothers you?”

“It does,” Will muttered, crossing his arms over his chest once more – tighter this time – and gave a shrug that was probably meant to look nonchalant. “Mostly, I'm embarrassed. I don’t know what came over me that night. Maybe it was just the, uh, shock. You know? Seeing her throat cut open like that, right before me.” The younger man forced another fake, albeit faint smile. "I don't normally react like that."

Will’s right knee had started bobbing. He was still stubbornly facing the window. Hannibal interpreted this as stress – potentially brought on by lying.

“Do you think it’s possible that your feelings of embarrassment are reflected through your visions of Hobbs mocking you?” Hannibal suggested. “Jack tells me you’ve never taken a life before. Do you feel inferior to your co-workers?”

Will said nothing for almost a full minute before he suddenly got up from the chair. Hannibal did no move to follow him, opting instead to observe Will from his seated position.

“You said you were hoping we could be friends,” Will said as he walked over to Hannibal’s book shelves, hands tucked neatly behind his back, as if he was taking a stroll through a public library.

“I did,” Hannibal said, curious to see where Will was trying to lead the conversation. Will stopped in his tracks and cocked his head to the side to better read the titles. He then reached for one of the hardbacks and pulled it out without asking permission to do so. Hannibal’s fingers twitched.

Had it been anyone else, Hannibal wouldn't have been in such a forgiving mood. He'd possibly consider bestowing some sort of consequence. Oddly enough, Will’s actions didn’t stir up any such feelings in him. Instead, it urged Hannibal to walk over to him and see what title Will had picked out – out of curiosity rather than anger.

“After what happened last week, are you still interested?”

Will was still facing the study, unaware that Hannibal was approaching him from behind. It wasn’t until Hannibal’s shadow appeared on the shelf that Will realized their close proximity and whipped around to face Hannibal, clutching the book in his hands.

True to his nature, Hannibal towered over Will in a way that he was sure Will found intimidating. A shiver of glee ran up Hannibal’s spine as he took in Will’s guarded expression. *Still so stubborn*. He leaned in closer to read the title of the book in Will’s hands.

Between Seduction And Inspiration: Man by Jean Laplanche. An altogether dull exploration of societal expectations.

He sought out Will’s eyes, waited patiently until the younger man finally looked back at him, and noticed the minute but very distinct dilation of Will’s pupils. Again, Hannibal felt a surge in his chest – the same odd feeling that Will’s panic attack had prompted in him just last week.

Command; He wants me to back off.

Hannibal was sure of it now.

Hannibal didn’t comment on it, however. Instead, he took the book from Will, put it back on the shelf and reached for another book, higher up. He placed it firmly in Will’s hands and smiled. The younger man looked a bit scandalized, which further amused Hannibal.

"I suggest this one instead. And yes," he went on, smiling calmly at the omega before him. "I'm still interested."

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Progress

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Major revision in progress. (March, 2024)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will was thoroughly pissed off when he returned home. Nothing had gone as planned that day, and his therapy session with Hannibal had been particularly disastrous. Despite the mental script he'd prepared for himself, so that he'd know just what to say in order to get himself off the hook and convince Hannibal that he was of sound mind, Hannibal had somehow managed to turn the tables on him.

He couldn't blame Hannibal entirely, though. He was the one who readily admitted to hallucinating about Hobbs. Hannibal hadn't even pressured him – the words just slipped out before Will even had the chance to reflect on them. He'd only barely managed to rein himself back in by offhandedly bringing up Hannibal's wish for friendship, hoping that it'd give him some kind of upper hand. It hadn't. Instead, Hannibal had cornered him, locked him in place with a mere look, unfazed by Will's manipulative attempts. It was humiliating on a number of levels.

"Goddamnit," he muttered under his breath as he kicked his shoes off aggressively, proceeding to throw his coat on the floor in sheer frustration. This act only served to make him feel like a child throwing a tantrum, however, so he immediately picked it up and hung it up by one of the hooks on the wall, grumbling to himself.

His dogs greeted him happily as he entered the living room and Will flopped down on the couch, exhausted despite the early hour – it wasn't even noon yet. He begrudgingly reviewed the session in his mind. Aside from his failed attempt at getting leverage, the rest of the session had been surprisingly uneventful.

Hannibal seemed to have noticed how uncomfortable Will was feeling and therefore kept his distance following the awkward incident by the book shelf. They'd discussed the night Hobbs died, Will's subsequent nightmares and his feelings of inferiority – and all this was regularly interrupted by Will's efforts to derail the conversation by, for instance, pointing out that the curtains adorning Hannibal's office were nice, or commenting on the gruesome weather. Hannibal hadn't seemed impressed, but then, Will wasn't there to impress him. He was there to convince him that he was sane.

Will was still extremely reluctant to sharing his thoughts and feelings with another individual,

and if Will had to psycho-analyse himself, he'd say it probably had something to do with the fact that *no one* had ever fully understood him before and he just didn't see why Hannibal would be any different. What made him so goddamned special?

Some inner demons are not to be shared – with *anyone*. The reality of this had dawned on him when he was still only a child, and he'd lived by that rule ever since.

Still, it seemed a part of Will *wanted* to trust the psychiatrist. A part of him wanted to open himself up and reveal who he was, spill his dirty little secrets, perhaps just to see how Hannibal would react – a notion as terrifying as it was tempting. Will found himself toying with the idea, disturbing as it was.

But in the end, Hannibal was an alpha, and alphas – even those who worked as psychiatrists – could never fully understand omegas. Hell, Hannibal didn't even know that that's what Will was. For all he cared, Hannibal could keep guessing. He'd play along until Hannibal had no choice but to release him back into the world of crime and death, where he belonged.

It felt so much safer to just keep lying, like Will had been doing every day for the past decade.

He looked down at the thick hardcover that Hannibal had lent him, resting innocently in his hands.

True Nature: An Anthropologic Journey, part I
Alpha, Beta, Omega – The Roots

Will frowned at the title, wondering – not for the first time that day – why on earth Hannibal had seemed so insistent about it, going so far as to take the book Will had picked out himself and replacing it with this one. It wasn't just a display of alpha dominance, or done on a whim – Hannibal *wanted* him to read it. But why?

Yawning lazily, Will sank deeper into the couch as he browsed through the pages. He stopped when he reached a chapter named; *Betas – the labourers*

Will spent the next minute reading about the early generations of betas and the theories regarding the necessity of their existence. They were the gatherers, the guards, the firewatchers and the craftsmen, for the most part. Will wasn't surprised. These roles seemed befitting of beta. They were like that: responsible, docile, hardworking.

Will sighed with boredom. It seemed the entire chapter was dedicated to explaining the role of betas in regard to the survival of their species. Alphas and omegas weren't mentioned much, but Will assumed there were plenty of other chapters describing in great detail how omegas were the designated breeding machines and babysitters, while alphas no doubt ran around hunting deer and wrestling bears all day long. He couldn't be bothered to read on. Didn't see the point, nor understand why Hannibal thought he'd be interested.

Perhaps he thought Will needed to be reminded of how significant betas were, despite lacking the strength of alphas and the sensuality of omegas? Maybe he thought it'd serve as a kind of

confidence boost, after everything Will had gone through? How ridiculous.

Will closed the book and threw it to the other end of the couch, utterly disinterested and too tired for reading anyway. He settled in against the soft pillows and turned the TV on. Re-runs of some old soap opera from the 90s' didn't exactly spark his interest, but he took comfort in having the sappy dialogues break the silence, keeping his mind from wandering too far. The minutes stretched on and Will found himself growing more and more drowsy, until suddenly-

"Hello Will."

The gritty voice came from the right, but Will couldn't bring himself to turn his head. Normally, his dogs would react instantaneously to any intruder unless Will made it clear they were welcome. But they never reacted to this one.

"Ignoring me? That's not very nice." It came from the left now, much closer to Will's ear. He gritted his teeth and directed every ounce of his concentration at the TV – but when the screen turned black and only offered a distorted reflection of the living room, ignoring the intruder became so much harder.

"*Will*?" The intruder sing-sang and let out a garbled snicker that sent a violent shudder down Will's spine. "C'mon. Look at me."

"I don't want to," he replied and immediately wanted to slap a hand over his mouth, groaning inwardly at his own stupidity. Speaking to the intruder, thus acknowledging its' existence, made it stick around longer. The intruder laughed once more.

"Oh, I'll bet," the intruder said. "I wouldn't want to look at me either. But see, I don't like being ignored."

The rotting face of Garrett Jacob Hobbs suddenly appeared right in front of Will, who flinched back and barely managed to contain a howl of dread. Hobbs' skin was discoloured and mouldy, his eyes were turning gray, and the tongue that snaked out between his cracked lips had taken on a disturbing black shade. Will wanted to vomit, but all he could do was stare back at the corpse.

Hobbs cocked his head to the side and leaned in close.

"See?" He whispered. "It's not so bad, really – facing your fears. And it was worth it, wasn't it?"

"Worth it..?" Will breathed, trembling from the tension in his muscles.

"You know what I mean." The corpse leaned in so close that their noses almost touched. "The night you shot me…"

"What?" Will gulped as he resisted the strong urge to get up and run. "What happened that night?"

Hobbs leaned back a fraction, appearing to search Will's eyes for a moment. He then gave Will something that could only be described as a sympathetic smile.

"You killed me, Will. You killed me, and…" Hobbs leaned in close to whisper the rest in his ear.

Will jerked back to reality with a choked gasp that made his dogs turn to stare at him, whining anxiously as they picked up on their master's obvious distress. As he desperately fought to catch his breath, Will scanned the room with wide eyes and was filled with staggering relief as he reassured himself that it had only been a nightmare. He must've dozed off at some point.

He got up and made his way to the kitchen on shaky legs. It was empty. So was the bathroom and his bedroom. Finally, Will threw a glance towards his backyard, which lead to the forest. Everything was still and serene.

He was alone.

As dizzying as the relief was, the horror lingered and the onslaught of adrenaline made him feel sick. Will almost thought he could smell the rot in the air as he made his way back to the couch. Pepper, his collie, jumped up on the cushion next to Will and settled against his thigh, likely sensing his need for comfort. As the dog tenderly licked his knuckles, Will couldn't help the lump that formed in his throat. He sent Pepper a quivering smile and stroked his hand over the dog's head as he settled against the pillows once more, praying to whatever deity that might've been listening in for a dreamless nap.

Hannibal stared at his visitors, fighting hard to hide his dismay. He'd known from the very moment he'd turned the radio on while he was driving to work that morning that they'd be stopping by.

Jack Crawford and Alana Bloom, two opposing forces of nature, both of them equally blind to everything that went against their own laws of ethics, highly respected in their respective fields, were now squabbling like two hissing cats on the other side of Hannibal's work desk.

Earlier that morning, two teenage boys that were out on a nightly adventure had made an absolutely horrifying discovery; several dead bodies – many of them with severe injuries, some of which indicated torture pre-mortem – in the cellar of an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town.

Hannibal's interest had been piqued by this, prompting him to make mental notes for himself as he listened to the newscast.

The FBI have no suspects so far. Forensic investigation still on-going. Crime scene cordoned – investigation team urges the public to keep their distance from the crime scene and the

surrounding area until further notice. Victims unidentified.

With this information, Hannibal concluded that Jack would likely be paying him a visit within the early hours of the day to demand Will's early return to the force. He also knew that Alana Bloom would draw the same conclusion and therefore show up to *stop* Jack.

The fact that he knew all this beforehand didn't help, however. Hannibal was in no mood for their childish spat.

"This is a matter of life or death, doctor Lecter. We *need* Will back on our team," Jack insisted.

"It's a matter of *Will's* life or death, too, Jack! You can't make him join the investigation when he's already in such bad shape. I wasn't there that night, but I know what happened, and I know that Will's not strong enough to deal with it yet." Alana's hands were firmly planted on her hips as she fixed Jack with one of her more intense glares. "He was on the verge of a break-down *before* any of that happened! And you want to force him out on the field again? It hasn't even been two weeks!"

"It's necessary!"

"No, it's irresponsible!"

"He's our best profiler, Alana!" Jack bellowed, returning her glare. "This lunatic has already killed *five* people. Who knows how many more lives he'll take while we're waiting for Will to come back to his goddamned senses!"

"Do you *hear* yourself?" Alana demanded, eyes wide with anger. "Jesus, Jack, you have an entire platoon of trained FBI agents at your disposal! You're telling me you can't do your damned job without stringing Will along like a puppet, even though he's barely keeping it together as it is?"

"We have a serial killer on our hands! Will's health is an important issue, but so is making sure that the killer ends up behind bars before he kills again!"

"Oh my God," Alana scoffed, bringing her hand up to rub at her forehead in exasperated frustration. "This is absurd. I can't believe we're having this discussion."

"Neither can I," Jack shot back, clearly agitated. The two stared angrily at one another for a moment and Hannibal took the opportunity to clear his throat.

"May I remind the both of you," he said, keeping his tone calm despite the irritation sizzling in his veins, "that I have only had *one* session with him so far?" He sent them both a steely look. "I need more time."

Alana sent Jack a triumphant glance. Jack looked displeased.

"I'm desperate, doctor."

“Will needs to *heal*, Jack-“

“I’m not making any promises – to *either* of you,” Hannibal clarified and quirked his eyebrow at Alana. Her satisfied smirk faded rapidly as she took in his words. “While I agree that Will is dire need of therapy and guidance, during our first session I didn’t get the impression that Will is so far gone that he can’t assist in investigations.”

“But-“

“Will is stronger than you think, Dr. Bloom,” he said, voice firm. “That being said, I need more time before I can make a founded assessment of his mental and emotional state. Our second session is scheduled for today. If it goes well, I’ll let you know,” he said and sent a pacifying nod to Jack, whose back straightened as he nodded back. “I would also like to remind you that this decision isn’t entirely for us to make – when all is said and done, Will is the one who decides whether or not he’ll return to the field.” Hannibal’s voice hardened as he continued. “Frankly, I find it a bit ludicrous that you two are discussing his future within the FBI when the man in question isn’t here to offer his own views on the matter.”

The silence that followed was tense and uncomfortable. Jack cleared his throat.

“You’re right, doctor,” he said with an expression that was probably supposed to resemble remorse. “I apologize. I hope you’ll do what you think is best for Will.”

No, you’re hoping I’ll do what you *think is best by pretending to submit to me.*

Hannibal resisted the urge to scoff. Jack was the kind of alpha who was used to getting his way by raising his voice – manipulation wasn’t a talent of his, though he probably liked to think it was. Hannibal played along by offering Jack a gentle smile.

Alana shrugged and gave a reluctant nod, clearly feeling undermined. As a beta working in an alpha-dominated sphere, she was used to being underestimated and having her opinions dismissed. Hannibal felt sorry for her, but not so much that he’d take her side on this. He had his own principles to adhere to.

“Fine,” she bit out, voice chilly. “But if he ends up hospitalized – or worse – I’m blaming you. Trust me, I know how to file a report and I’m not afraid to do it.”

With that, she turned on her heel and walked out of the room with quick, angry steps. Jack sent Hannibal an uncomfortable smile and nodded politely in adieu before he followed her out.

Hannibal sighed heavily as he leaned back in his chair. Interacting with normal people was exhausting. They were so controlled by the bondage of their own emotions and their crippling morals and their ridiculous view on right versus wrong. Their worlds were so black and white.

Hannibal sometimes found it overwhelmingly difficult to relate to them.

He straightened up and stretched his neck out by slowly leaning his head forward, checking his wrist watch in the process. Will's session would be starting in less than ten minutes. He had time for a cup of tea.

Hannibal was just about to get up and retrieve his thermos when he heard a creak. He glanced towards the waiting room. The door wasn't closed all the way. Jack and Alana had used Hannibal's private exit when they left his study, which meant they weren't responsible for the gap. Hannibal squared his shoulders and suppressed a smile.

He's early.

"Will?" He called out softly. "You can come in if you'd like."

He heard the door swing open and, after a few seconds, soft footsteps approaching. He turned his head and smiled as Will emerged from the shadows of the hallway. He looked about as happy as the last time Hannibal saw him, but instead of the blatant hostility from Tuesday, Will's face was now settled in cold resignation.

"I was just about to have a cup of tea," Hannibal said, keeping his tone light. "Would you like some?"

Will glared at the floor for a few seconds before giving a brief nod. Hannibal turned away from him and started preparing two cups of freshly brewed tea for them. Will's mood was making the air toxic around them. Hannibal found his shoulders tensing up. Without turning to look at Will, he spoke.

"How are you feeling today?"

For a few moments, the clinking of teaspoons against porcelain were the only sounds breaking the silence.

"Fine," came the dispassionate answer. Hannibal glanced over his shoulder. Will was, yet again, strolling by his book shelves with his head cocked to the side. Hannibal smiled and turned back to his task.

"Would you like some sugar?"

"No," Will replied, and then, "you know… I was going to say this the last time I was here, but you seem to own a lot of literature on human biology. Mind if I ask why? Gender studies isn't exactly your professional area of expertise."

Hannibal started making his way over to Will, leaving the cup behind so as to let them cool off a bit.

"I find it fascinating," was Hannibal's honest response. Will, who appeared to not have learned his lesson from last time, kept his back to Hannibal and let out a scoff.

“Of course you do,” Will sighed, voice dry and tired.

“Is that an issue?” Hannibal questioned, positioned right behind Will. He noticed that the fine hairs on Will’s nape stood up and Hannibal couldn’t help but to lean in just a little bit closer and inhale the air around Will. This finally earned him a reaction from the younger man.

“Did…” Will slowly turned to look at him, eyes wide with insulted disbelief. “Did you just *smell* me?”

“Hard not to,” Hannibal said and immediately backed off, knowing how much it bothered Will to have his personal space invaded. “Sandalwood, right?”

“… Yeah,“ Will reluctantly admitted and brought a hand up to rub at his nape, as if he could still feel Hannibal’s breath against his skin.

“It’s a rather strong fragrance,” Hannibal said with a polite smile – truthfully, he was displeased. None of Will’s natural scent came through. It didn’t take a genius to figure out why Will would douse himself in chemicals every morning, but now wasn’t the time. Hannibal gestured to the chairs in the centre of the room with a disarming quirk of his eyebrow. “Now, how about we get started?”

Will nodded uncertainly and took a seat. Hannibal retrieved the steaming cups and offered Will one. The younger man brought the cup up to his nose and his expression twisted in confusion at the aroma.

“What kind of tea is this?” He asked, clearly suspicious, as if he thought Hannibal was trying to poison him. Hannibal couldn’t help the amused grin that formed on his face.

“I make it myself, using herbs from my own garden,” he explained. “It has soothing effects, which is why I sometimes bring a thermos to work.”

Will continued to appear doubtful but ultimately brought the cup to his lips to take a brave sip.

“Well,” he said and offered Hannibal a softer look. “It tastes better than I thought it would, I’ll give you that.”

“Much obliged. I take pride in my teas.” Hannibal assumed his position as psychiatrist and leaned back in his chair. “Let’s not waste any time. How much did you overhear?”

Will flinched at the uncomfortable change of subject, nearly spilling his tea. After taking a deep breath, Will placed the cup on the side table and leaned back in the chair, hands clasping together between his thighs.

“Everything following Alana saying I wasn’t ‘strong enough to deal with it.’” His voice was laced with bitter resentment. “I never realized how weak she thinks I am.”

“She’s concerned for your well-being,” Hannibal said, treading carefully. “Is that something

that bothers you?"

"The fact that she's *concerned* isn't what bothers me," Will muttered. Hannibal waited to see if Will was going to elaborate. When he didn't, Hannibal decided to do it for him.

"But rather the fact that she perceives you as someone who's in need of her protection?"

For a brief second, to Hannibal's surprised delight, Will's face twisted into an enraged snarl. It was a magnificent sight, gone in the blink of an eye.

"I'm… *glad* that she cares about me," Will bit out, but the affronted tone of his voice betrayed him. "I just don't appreciate being looked down upon. I don't need her to coddle me."

"I agree," Hannibal commented, taking a sip from his tea. Will sent him a brief glance, face warming with gratitude.

"Yeah, I heard. You told them off. Thanks."

"No need to thank me. I didn't say any of that as a favour to you – I said it because it's what I genuinely believe," Hannibal stated and placed his cup on the small side table. "You don't need to be coddled, because you're not weak."

Will's cheeks reddened slightly upon receiving Hannibal's praise.

"Great. Now we just need to convince Alana," Will mumbled, a humorous glint lighting up his eyes. Hannibal nodded and smiled back.

"Perhaps we need to convince you, too. Do you think you're weak, Will?"

Will hesitated. Crossed his arms over his chest, just like he did the previous session – a subconscious attempt to protect himself.

"Define '*weak'*."

"How about you give it a try?" Hannibal suggested. Will sighed heavily and his gaze darted around the room as he appeared to collect his thoughts.

"Alana's idea of weakness seems to be…" Will swallowed. "Being unstable."

"Perhaps. But what do *you* think?"

Will shrugged. A ghost of shame and fear dragged over Will's features.

"My idea of weakness is giving up… or giving *in.*"

Hannibal narrowed his eyes. Now *that* was an interesting notion.

“Giving in to what?”

“Temptations.”

“*What* temptations?”

Will’s jaws pulsated with tension. Hannibal could see it clearly despite the distance between them. The younger man reached for his cup, but appeared to change his mind and put the cup back. He dragged his hands against his thighs, up and down, and cleared his throat. Clearly stalling. When he finally raised his gaze to meet Hannibal’s, Will looked incredibly torn. His voice trembled from withheld emotion once he finally spoke.

“I… *enjoyed* killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Heavy silence filled the room. Hannibal kept his face neutral as he waited for Will to gather himself. The impact of having admitted something that must’ve weighed heavily on him for nearly two weeks was hitting the younger man hard. Will breathed quickly as his face got increasingly clammy with cold sweat. Hannibal took pity on him.

“I suspected that was the case,” Hannibal said, keeping his voice low and firm. Will let out a shaky scoff and gave an agitated shrug.

“Of course you did,” he sneered. “Why am I even here? Clearly, you already know everything there is to know about me."

If only you knew what it is that I know about you.

It was obvious that Will took offense to Hannibal’s claim. It must’ve hurt, being told that something he tried so hard to keep hidden had already been uncovered. But Will didn’t know Hannibal that well yet. He didn’t know what Hannibal was. Which was why Hannibal chose to remain calm and ignore Will’s outburst.

He leaned back comfortably in his chair and crossed his leg over the other as he reached for his cup. He took his time, taking slow sips from the calming concoction, all the while keeping eye contact with Will, who seemed to be too upset to remember how much he disliked looking into other people’s eyes. Once Hannibal sensed that Will was calm enough to listen to him without lashing out, he continued.

“You’re accustomed to death, Will,” he stated matter-of-factly. “Your job revolves around it – you face death all the time. Your unique method of looking at crime scenes from the perspective of the perpetrators should have benumbed your sensitivity long ago. Therefore, even though I’m sure taking a life for the first time would be harrowing, it shouldn’t have provoked *you*, of all people, the way that it did.” He paused and leaned forward in his seat. The muscles in Will's jaw tensed, but he did not look away.

“You’re a man of strict morals. I theorised that the only thing that could trigger such a profound reaction in you was if those morals were challenged.”

Will's chest shook as he laughed joylessly. His body slackened against the chair and he threw his head back – probably to avoid facing Hannibal.

"And here I thought I could just bullshit my way back," he mumbled, voice raw with emotion. "I knew you were good, but I didn't realize you were *this* good." He dragged a tired hand across his face as he sat back up, straightening his back. "Just my luck, I suppose."

"Your hallucinations are a product of your subconsciousness," he continued. "I'd say the real reason you've been so ashamed of yourself is because you feel that you're the same as Hobbs – you *enjoyed* killing a man who *enjoyed* killing those girls. That's why the Hobbs you see in your visions is mocking you – you subconsciously feel that's what you deserve. That enjoyment – that thrill of power you felt when you ended his life – defied every single code of conduct in your head. Every pillar of principle and moral that your psyche relies on was torn down that night."

Will slowly lifted his head to look at him. His eyes were glossy, as if he'd suddenly come down with a fever, but they no longer held any hostility. Hannibal blinked slowly and met Will's anguished gaze head-on, trying to convey a sense of comfort.

"It's no wonder you reacted the way you did. Your entire state of mind, your image of self, probably shifted the very moment you pulled that trigger."

They sat in total silence for a few minutes minute. Hannibal heard cars go by outside the windows. Birds chirping. Will appeared to fight hard to wrap the situation around his head. He leaned forward in his seat, pressing his chin into his clasped-together hands.

"Am I…" Will croaked and paused to clear his throat. "Am I going insane? Should I be locked up?"

"Not at all," Hannibal stated and smoothed his tie out. "I was actually thinking that you could start working again, if you want."

The incredulous stare Will sent him was priceless. He looked as though Hannibal had just suggested moving to Mars. He opened and closed his mouth several times before he found his voice.

"… What?"

"Now that we've resolved the issue, I see no reason why you shouldn't be permitted to work with the FBI again, under my guidance of course, if that's what you wish to do."

"Resolved the…" Will sent him a confused frown. "What issues have we resolved, exactly? Sounded more like we were in agreement; killing Hobbs broke something in me."

"You're not broken, Will. And we *have* resolved the issue," Hannibal argued. "You're no longer in denial. That's definitely progress. Your Hobbs-hallucinations should gradually cease henceforth."

“But it doesn’t... *change* anything.” Will stated, face twisting in disgust. “I'm a federal agent who took *pleasure* in killing a man.”

“No amount of therapy will ever change how you felt about taking his life,” Hannibal pointed out. “It’s in the past. Now that you’re aware and honest about your feelings, we can move forward.”

“But…” Will hesitated before he continued. “I don’t want to feel that way. Ever again.” He looked up, eyes resolute and stormy. “I’m scared that I’ll-“

“You think you might snap and start killing people at random?” Hannibal couldn’t help the way the corner of his mouth quirked. Will noticed and didn’t seem amused.

“Is it so weird for me to be worried about that?” He muttered. “Considering what I do for a living… What if Alana’s right? What if I’m so unstable that I’ll lose myself and become the very thing I hunt?”

“The fact that you experienced a rush of power and ecstasy from taking down a man who killed several innocent teenage girls doesn’t make you a madman, Will. Nor does it make you a criminal.”

“Maybe not,” Will mumbled, though he still appeared doubtful. He looked exhausted by now. Colour was returning to his face, but his shoulders were slumping and his voice was hoarse from fatigue. “I want to return to the force, I really do. I just want to be sure that I don't lose my goddamned mind in the process.”

“Will,” Hannibal sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I’m not saying we should terminate your therapy. I’m saying I’d be willing to let you assist in investigations – so long as I’m permitted to continue visiting the crime scenes with you and act as your counsellor on site. I’ll be discussing the details of this arrangement with Jack Crawford momentarily, but seeing as he’s desperate to get you back, he’s not likely to protest. We’ll be continuing with our scheduled sessions for the time being.”

Will gaped at him, seemingly at a loss for words. Hannibal sent him a comforting smile.

“Would that arrangement be agreeable to you?”

Will studied him for a few seconds.

“It would,” Will finally said, gratitude and relief bleeding into his voice. He gathered himself and cleared his throat. “I... I don't know what to say."

“Let me be clear on one thing, though,” Hannibal said as he made his way over to his desk to collect his phone. “I’m not going to tell any of your co-workers what we’ve discussed here today. Neither should you.” He sent Will a grave look. The light in Will’s eyes flickered, but his face settled into an expression of determination rather than one of concern. He nodded.

“That works for me.”

“Good,” Hannibal turned his back to Will and dialled Jack’s number. “You’re free to go. I suggest you take the opportunity to have lunch while you still have time. I have a feeling you’ll be called into work soon.”

He brought the phone to his ear and waited. In the background, he heard how Will gathered his things and started making his way towards the exit. When Will’s footsteps paused, Hannibal turned his head to look at him.

For the first time since they met, Will granted him a soft, genuine smile. It made the blue in his eyes shine.

“Thank you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal savoured the way those words made his chest ache with contentment.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Tolerance

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Major revision in progress. (March, 2024)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The familiar sensation of cold dread mixed with heated anticipation blossomed within Will's chest when the crime scene came into view and the car slowed down. Hannibal had insisted on driving them there.

Will had barely even made it out of the building where Hannibal worked when his cell phone rang, letting him know that he was being summoned. Something big was going on, that much was obvious. Lunch would have to wait. Hannibal soon joined him on the parking lot, car keys at the ready, and Will didn't see the point in putting up a fight.

He certainly wasn't going to complain. Not when Hannibal was going out of his way to make sure Will's return to the field would be safe for everyone involved. But he did feel a sting of shame at the prospect of entering the crime scene with his psychiatrist tagging along like his own personal babysitter.

As they approached the crime scene, however, Will was struck by how the flashing lights, the bright yellow barricade tape criss-crossing the area and the heavy atmosphere brought him back to that night, and he was instantly filled with a begrudging sense of relief that Hannibal would be by his side – not that he was about to admit it. He discreetly looked over to the driver's side, taking in Hannibal's profile. The psychiatrist looked mildly interested in what was going on ahead of them, but his body language was as calm and relaxed as always. Somehow, the sight made Will ease up a bit, too.

Right. This is my job. It's just another crime scene.

He released a tight breath and unclenched his fists, slowly but steadily entering a more confident headspace. Hannibal gave Will a brief side-glance, appearing to have noticed the shift in Will's mood.

"Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah," Will nodded and cleared his throat to ensure his voice wouldn't betray him. "I'm okay."

Hannibal parked the car next to a couple of police vans and before Will could exit the car, Hannibal reached over to plant his hand firmly on his shoulder. Will paused, but he didn't turn to look at the older man.

“Will, I trust that you’ll take advantage of my presence here,” Hannibal said. “I’m letting you partake in this investigation because I know how important it is to you – and frankly, I'm a firm believer in exposure therapy - as long as you don’t try and overreach. Look at me.”

Without thinking, Will obliged. The older man’s gaze was intense and steady, the sunlight reflecting in his brown eyes made them look like glowing ambers. Will couldn’t look away.

“I need you to promise me you won’t force yourself. If you feel you need to take a break, you *take* a break. If you feel you need to get away, you *tell* me. Understood?”

Will nodded slowly, trying to ignore the way Hannibal’s gloved hand on his shoulder made him feel.

“I understand. But I need you to promise me something as well.” He paused briefly and lowered his gaze. “You’ve never really seen me in action, have you?”

“What do you mean?” Hannibal’s hand retreated. “I was there the night you shot Hobbs.”

“Yes, but that time was different. I wasn’t investigating a crime scene that time,” Will explained in a flurry, feeling stupid for not having briefed Hannibal on this beforehand. “The way I operate is complicated. I immerse myself completely in the personas I detect, it’s almost like a state of hypnosis, and…” he paused, feeling his heart beat heavily in his chest, “I need you to piece me back together once I come out of it.”

Tense silence settled in the cramped space. Will offered Hannibal a bleak smile before he opened the car door, hoping his vague words somehow made sense to the psychiatrist.

“You can do that, can’t you?”

Hannibal didn’t get the chance to reply before Will exited the vehicle, but if he was at all disturbed by Will’s odd request, he hid it well. They walked towards the scene together in silence and were soon greeted by Jack Crawford, who wore a grim, concerned scowl as he emerged from the building where the bodies had been found. A deputy lifted the yellow tape for Hannibal and Will to duck under and as soon as they were inside, Will felt as though he’d entered a separate universe – one where only death and fear existed. It made his skin crawl. From fear or excitement, he didn't know.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Jack told Will earnestly and reached out to plant his hands around Will’s shoulders in a gesture of welcome, only for Will to lean away from the touch, not quite managing to keep his unwillingness from his face. Jack noticed and immediately withdrew his hands with an apologetic look on his face. “Sorry, I keep forgetting-“

“What do you know so far?” Will interrupted and effortlessly slipped into his role as profiler as he looked over the building, sniffing slightly from the chilly autumn air. Jack followed suit and dug around in his pockets to retrieve a note pad.

“Not much, except that the perpetrator is most likely an alpha,” he explained. “Five bodies

were found inside, all of them in varying stages of decay. Blood loss from several severe cuts seems to be the cause of death, but we don't know for sure yet. Some of the victims seem to have sustained injuries that don't follow any specific pattern."

Will frowned. "You mean, some of the victims were treated harsher than others?"

"It would seem that way," Jack nodded. "Only one of the victims has a broken leg, for instance. Another one has a pretty severe burn."

"That's odd," Will mused. "It's possible that some of the victims fought back harder which made the perpetrator retaliate and inflict injuries on them that he or she hadn't initially planned. But a *burn*? That's a strange irregularity."

"It is – unless they had a good reason for using different methods," Jack pointed out and sent Will a grim look. "I'll leave the profiling to you, of course, but my guess is that the killer tortured them in varying ways because these murders weren't specifically planned out beforehand."

"What makes you say that?"

Jack hesitated, gaze darting back and forth between Will and Hannibal. He put the note pad away and gave Will a thin, joyless smile.

"You'll see what I mean once you're down there," he muttered, as if he was too appalled by the scene to discuss it in detail. He gave Will a concerned frown. "Look, I know you're still recovering, and truthfully, I feel bad for dragging you into this. It's a pretty gruesome scene, Will. I need you to prepare yourself. I also want you to know that we have a paramedic team on standby if…" He trailed off with an uncomfortable look on his face. Will understood.

If I need them to take care of me afterwards.

He glared at the ground for a second as a coat of shame crawled over his back, searing his skin. He'd wanted to think he was prepared for the inevitable special treatment that was awaiting, but for *Jack* of all people to treat him like some fragile porcelain cup? It stung more than Will had anticipated.

Suddenly, a secure hand landed on Will's shoulder once more, forcing a startled flinch through his upper body.

"No need to worry, Jack," Hannibal's deep voice stated from Will's left. "Will is making steady progress. We're as prepared as we can get. He just explained the nature of the methods he'll be using. Should anything unexpected happen, I'm here if he needs me."

Under normal circumstances, this manoeuvre would likely have pissed Will off. Will absolutely hated being patronized, and what Hannibal just did came dangerously close to that. But when Hannibal gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze, Will got the sense that Hannibal was trying to handle *Jack* rather than him, which had a much more invigorating effect on his mood.

The rush of confidence helped Will straighten his back, and his sense of duty took over. After taking a deep breath, he started walking towards the building – without sparing Jack so much as a glance. Hannibal followed a few steps behind and the sound of his shoes against the gravel granted Will a sense of comfort – his presence was like a safety line that Will could reach out for and grab onto if things went south. Will had never had a safety line before.

As he approached the old factory and peered into the opening that led down to the basement, Will's chest tightened slightly. The dread from earlier made itself known, but he wasn't about to walk away. He paused just outside the entrance. Two forensic investigators emerged – looking pale and distressed. They walked past Will without acknowledging him, discussing their findings with one another in hushed tones.

Will turned to look at Hannibal, who watched the forensics shuffle past him with a raised eyebrow and, oddly enough, a quirked lip. Almost as though the psychiatrist found their behaviour amusing. Hannibal hadn't yet participated in that many investigations, and certainly not this up-close before. It was possible that he, as a psychiatrist, observed everything that was going on around them through a lens of curiosity. He seemed the type. When Hannibal looked up and met Will's gaze, his untroubled smile remained intact. Considering their location – not to mention their purpose for being there – it was an odd sight to behold.

Maybe he's trying to maintain a sense of calm for my sake?

Regardless, Will had no time to mull over Hannibal's behaviour. He had more important things to worry about.

"I'll be going down now. I normally prefer to be alone when I observe," he admitted, hoping Hannibal wouldn't take offense. "Having you beside me would be distracting, so…"

"I'll wait here," Hannibal said and gave an understanding nod. "Just call out for me if you need any assistance."

Will nodded gratefully and turned back to the entrance. It felt as though he was about to descend into hell. Swallowing tightly, Will took his first few steps into the building.

The crummy staircase that led down to the basement was immersed in darkness, but he detected a light source ahead. Once he was a bit further in and his eyes adjusted to the dimness, Will was suddenly struck by the immensely unpleasant odour of decay.

He recoiled and reached out a clammy hand to support himself against the wall as he gathered himself. The stench was familiar to him, but for all the years he'd spent working for the FBI, he still wasn't completely accustomed to the uglier sides of his job. And truthfully, the smell of rotting corpses wasn't something that he ever hoped to get used to.

Once he'd collected himself, he proceeded into the spacious basement, keeping his eyes on the ground as he stepped inside. This was a neat trick he'd taught himself – get in first, *then* look. Never the other way around; never when it came to crime scenes. Because once he was

inside, there was no going back.

Bile rose in his throat and Will clenched his jaws tightly, forcing himself to keep his gaze steady and forward.

Five bodies, all of them female from the looks of it, each one haphazardly positioned – one was discarded in a corner, another one was splayed out in the middle of the floor. This told Will that the killer felt no remorse for his actions. He'd killed the women one by one and then left them in whatever position they died in; like a child who couldn't be bothered to pick up his toys after he was done playing with them.

Jack's team had already done a thorough job – the bodies were outlined with tape and there were number tags all over the floor, each one representing foot prints, blood stains and other signs of potential evidence. The room was dimly lit up by several large black lights, adding to the ominous atmosphere.

For a brief second, Will regretted telling Hannibal to wait outside. He debated with himself over whether or not he should call for the older man, but decided against it. He didn't need Hannibal to hold his hand. Not for *this*. This was *his* job.

Will forced himself to enter a different headspace – a colder, observant, professional headspace, one that made it easier to shut out his personal feelings and just *look*.

Will walked up to the body closest to him – a thin, female body, facing the wall. Her brown hair had previously been tied in a braid that was coming apart. The body was naked and bruised. Will crouched down beside it and cocked his head to the side. Frowning slightly when he noticed the wound on the neck. A bitemark? It hadn't healed, which meant that the killer probably bit her shortly before he killed her, and it looked more like someone had chewed off a large chunk of flesh, rather than just sinking their teeth in.

Will's eyes strayed further down her body, fighting the repulsion that welled up in him as he took in the state of her nether regions. A glass bottle had been violently inserted in her rectum, and judging by the battered state of the orifice, the perpetrator had likely inserted various other sharp objects before plugging her up, using the bottle like a cork. Will resisted the urge to wince – if she was alive throughout the whole ordeal, which was likely the case, she must've been in excruciating pain.

Sadist tendencies. Compulsive anger issues. He took his rage out on these women.

He released a slow breath and straightened up. Took a few steps back and closed his eyes. Focused on his heartbeats. The stench. The mournful atmosphere. His *playground*.

The rhythm of his pulse slowed down as the image of different man took shape within Will, filled him, and finally, took hold of him. He opened his eyes.

The pendulum swung once.

Blood stains disappeared from the body he'd just examined.

The pendulum swung twice.

She was now alive and staring at up him from the floor, tears flowing down her cheeks. The panic in her wide eyes made something deep within him purr in delight.

Yeah, that's it. Be afraid. Good girl.

"You're not special to me, we're not related," he stated as the knowledge came to him, raising his knife in front of the crying woman to intimidate her. "I brought you here because I'm confident no one will disturb us. I picked you because you represent something…" He turned to the other bodies in the room, the ones he'd already killed and left to rot. "As do the rest. You all have something in common."

"P-please," she pleaded, "I won't tell anyone…" her voice was so deranged by horror that it almost made her sound like a wailing animal. He found it both amusing and appropriate. "Please, let me go… I'll do whatever you want!"

He grinned, wider than he normally would, and crouched down in front of her, slamming his fist against the wall just above her head, making her jerk away.

"Oh, but see – you had your chance. You had your chance to please me and you let me down. You disrespected me. So now," he paused to lean in closer, "you'll suffer the consequences. You need to learn your place, omega."

This is my design.

He grabbed onto her shoulder and shoved her down, pressing her upper body against the floor, and positioned himself above her trembling form. He dragged his tongue over his teeth, enjoying the feel of the sharp canines, the rush of power and adrenaline, before he leaned over her, opened his mouth wide and sunk his teeth into her smooth, sweaty neck. Marking her. Stealing her away. As was his *right*.

The scream she let out was like music – it burned deep inside his ears. He soon grew tired of it, however, so he silenced her by grabbing a fistful of her hair and repeatedly slamming her head against the concrete floor, knocking her out.

He paused momentarily. Looked around.

What now?

His eyes landed on a dusty plastic bag full of rusty nails that had been left behind by the workers of the factory when it closed down. It was only half-full, and the white plastic around the bag's opening was cleaner than the bottom, indicating that the bag had been recently opened. His intentions became clear.

"While you're unconscious, I'll fill you with these and destroy you from the inside. It's what you deserve, omega whore," he mumbled, voice teetering on hysteria, as he grabbed fistful of

the rusty nails and brought them between her legs. “Because you disrespected me. Learn your *fucking* place.”

Get out.

Her body shook as he ripped her open, but she was still not fully conscious. Not that he minded – the scream she let out earlier was still ringing in his head. The nails were rusty but still sharp and pointy enough to tear through her flesh and ruin the muscles that kept her intact-

Get. Out.

Pleased with his work, he regarded her for a second. Just to make sure the nails wouldn’t fall out of her, he grabbed a nearby bottle from the dusty floor, and shoved it inside. He heard how the glass made contact with the metal inside of her, and it *crunched*-

GET OUT!

Will jerked back – mentally and physically. Dazed with disgust and horror from what he’d just endured, he took a few staggering steps back, eyes glued to the dead body in front of him. Slowly, his gaze slid over to the other dead bodies and he instantly knew that they’d received the same treatment.

On wobbly legs, he turned away from the scene and started heading back towards the stairs, desperate to get up and out – only to freeze in his tracks as he noticed the message spray-painted in huge, clumsy letters on the wall right next to the exit.

PUNISHMENT
- A

It had been almost twenty minutes and Hannibal was getting tired of waiting. Tired of answering Jack’s intrusive questions. Tired of the weak coffee he’d been forced to drink – from a *paper cup*, no less. Tired of standing still, pretending to be perfectly happy to do so.

He was itching to go down there; itching to see what had evoked such a profound reaction in these men and women. If the basement had been in such a state that even Jack Crawford – famous BSU hot shot and self-proclaimed veteran – was at a loss for words, it must be a sight to behold.

He was just about to take a step closer to the entrance and peer into the darkness when Will suddenly came stumbling out, nearly smashing into Hannibal in his hurry to escape the building. Hannibal quickly took a step to the side to give Will some room, but when he saw the younger man’ face, he instantly felt the need to get closer to him.

Will face was disturbingly pale, even by his standards, and covered in a fine sheen of sweat. His eyes were firmly planted on the ground, but he didn't seem to be looking where he was going. Hunched over, breathing heavily. Erratic movements. Will was having another panic attack.

Shit.

"Will." Hannibal took a careful step closer, but immediately retreated when Will struck out with his arm in an effort to keep him away, shaking his head wordlessly. Hannibal opted instead to try and calm the younger man with his words. "Will, breathe. Remember where we are. I'm right here."

Piece him back together.

"You can do that, can't you?"

Hannibal wasn't sure that he could. Not when Will so vehemently opposed to his support – his very presence. The rejection smarted, but he didn't back down.

"Focus on your breathing. You're okay," Hannibal reassured the younger man, keeping his voice soft and steady. Will remained mute, now slumping against the wall as he appeared to try and gather himself. His gaze was still lowered and unfocused, but he did appear to try and follow Hannibal's instructions; deep breaths.

"Will!" Jack practically roared as he came rushing from somewhere behind Hannibal. "What's the initial profile?"

Hannibal reacted on impulse as he barricaded Jack with a single step to the left, fixing him with a stare. Jack stopped and gave Hannibal an affronted look – which rapidly faltered as Hannibal glared down at him, failing to maintain his calm exterior.

"Not now, Jack." The blatant disapproval in Hannibal's voice was enough to keep Jack from arguing. Instead, the man took a step back, appearing to assess the situation. "He needs space."

The sound of Will vomiting violently reached his ears and Hannibal threw a look over his shoulder, chest clenching oddly at the sight of Will supporting himself against the wall with both hands as he emptied the sparse contents of his stomach on the ground.

They waited patiently for Will to calm down. His breath was slowing down to a steadier rhythm and eventually, he pushed away from the wall and turned to face them – looking like he'd been through hell and back. Dark curls clung to his damp forehead, and his body shook from a never-ending series of violent tremors. Hannibal kept his distance, knowing full well that Will would reject him if he acted on his own.

It wasn't until Will looked up, gaze locking with Hannibal's, that he moved. Hannibal was practically pulled forward by the haunted look on Will's face, his slumping shoulders, the guarded agitation in his posture.

The need to soothe overtook Hannibal. The need to *protect,* to *support*. Just like last time, on the sidewalk. Only this time, Hannibal was aware of what it was – and didn't hesitate.

He reached Will in just a few long strides, positioning himself right next to the trembling profiler. Jack followed suit but kept a respectful distance, forehead creased with concern.

"Are you alright?" Jack asked, eyes darting carefully between them. Will nodded jerkily and took a shivering breath.

"They're all omegas," he muttered, voice hoarse and uneven. Jack nodded.

"Yes, we figured as much," he sighed. "So what are we looking at? Some rogue alpha gone mad? It's obviously a crime of passion."

"Yes, it is," Will shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself, struggling to remain upright. "But the perpetrator is not an alpha."

Jack blinked with surprise. Hannibal shared his sentiments, but he maintained a more neutral expression, patiently waiting for Will to elaborate. Jack didn't possess the same patience.

"I'm… sorry, but I find that a bit hard to believe. Are you sure?" He seemed extremely doubtful.

"Yes," Will cleared his throat. "The killer is a beta who *thinks* he's an alpha; who *wants to be* an alpha. I'm not sure about his mental state, he could be suffering from a psychosis, I couldn't get a clear-"

"But are you *sure*?" Jack took a small step forward and jabbed a hand in Will's direction, clearly sceptical of Will's theory. "Because the marks on those necks clearly indicate that an alpha is behind this. I don't need lab results to tell me that."

"I know," Will sighed impatiently, "those bites are too pronounced, and then there's just the sheer force behind it all... Everything points towards an alpha. But that's just it, Jack. He *wants* everything to point to that." Will shook his head incredulously. "I mean, he spray-painted the wall and signed it with an A. He's trying too hard. The person you're looking for is a very confused, very *sick* beta."

Jack hesitated, taking his time to wrap Will's words around his head. The tension in his shoulders didn't ease up, and the creases in his forehead deepened. He wasn't convinced.

"What's his reasons for doing this?"

"From what I could tell; frustration," Will explained around a shiver. "He's somehow convinced himself that he's an alpha, so when the omegas he encounters don't treat him as such, the delusion breaks and he lashes out. He feels that it's within his rights to demand respect, perhaps even *adoration*, from omegas… and to punish those who don't live up to his expectations."

Jack didn't take notes. Instead, he frowned bitterly at Will as the silence stretched out uncomfortably. Will's agitation increased.

"You seem sceptical, Jack."

"Frankly, Will, I *am* sceptical," Jack admitted, shoving his hands into his pockets. "It seems like one hell of a reach."

"Not like it's the first time I've had to think outside the box for you," Will retorted, voice teetering on a snarl. "And I'm always right."

Something pleasant ran up Hannibal's spine at Will's daring display of confidence. He glanced down at the younger man and marvelled at the tired but heated glare Will was directing at his commander. Jack, however, didn't seem to appreciate Will's defiance.

"We both know that you haven't exactly been at the top of your game lately," he fired back and sent a pointed look Hannibal's way. "There's a reason Dr. Lecter is here, after all."

Will bristled.

"I see, so you just wanted me to confirm *your* theory, and now that my assessment doesn't match yours, I'm suddenly too unstable to be taken seriously?" He snapped, voice gaining volume with each word. Jack took an aggressive step forward.

"That's enough!" He barked, eyes wide with anger. "Go home. Clearly, having you return this early was a mistake." With those harsh parting words, Jack turned and walked away from them.

Will stepped forward in a thoughtless attempt follow the other man, but ended up wobbling dangerously on his feet, still dizzy from his previous episode. Hannibal reflexively shot out a hand and placed it on Will's back, pressing his gloved fingers gently against the soft curve of the younger man's spine.

To his pleased surprise, Will immediately relaxed into his touch. The sensation of Will's muscles straining against his hand – welcoming his support – was one that Hannibal savoured like a fine wine.

It dawned on him that Will, albeit unwittingly, had been rejecting Jack's touch all day – while tolerating Hannibal's. The realization of this made his chest swell possessively, desire heating his veins.

Will seemed to ease into a calmer state of mind, and instead of chasing after Jack, he remained by Hannibal's side – apparently too deep in thought to take notice of how his body behaved. Not that Hannibal particularly minded. It wasn't until Will sighed in defeat and suggested that they leave that he discreetly withdrew his hand, not wanting to give Will the chance to reject him.

“Do you agree with him?” Will asked quietly as they slowly made their way back to Hannibal’s car.

“If by that you mean, do I think you’re too unstable to do your job? No. I don’t.”

Will looked at him, eyebrow raised, mouth curving into an incredulous smile.

“You seem to have a lot of faith in me.”

Hannibal smiled back.

“That’s because I see a lot of potential in you, Will.”

“Fantastic,” Will sighed and opened the door to the passenger’s side. “Alana thinks I’m weak. Jack thinks I’m crazy. But you? You ‘see potential in me.’” He hopped into the car and Hannibal soon joined him. They slammed their doors shut and for a few seconds, they merely enjoyed the odd tranquillity that filled the small space. Will turned to look at Hannibal with a half-smile. “Can you promise me you’re not just saying what I want to hear because you’re my psychiatrist?”

“Can you promise me you’ll believe me if I say yes?” Hannibal retorted with an amused smirk and started the engine. Will gave a tired chuckle, which had a wonderfully softening effect on his face – ridding him of some of the haunted shadows from his earlier activities.

“Guess we’ll have to take each other’s words for it.”

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Contemplation

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Major revision in progress. (March, 2024)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will groaned irritably as he, for the umpteenth time that night, found himself staring up at the ceiling. The nightmares wouldn't let him sleep for more than an hour or so at a time – and they kept getting worse. Naked, dead bodies encircling him and suffocating him in his sleep.

Reminding himself that he wasn't alone in the house, and that his loyal canines were asleep downstairs, didn't help. Will felt uneasy and the adrenaline that rushed through his system made it impossible to relax.

His sheets were now thoroughly soaked by his sweat, clinging uncomfortably to his skin, chilling him to the bones. His muscles were sore and stiff from his constant shivering and eventually, Will decided he'd had enough. He unclenched his fists to release the iron grip he had on his blanket and sat up.

He looked over to his nightstand, where his digital alarm clock resided. The crimson digits let him know that sunrise was still several hours away, which soured his mood further. It was barely half past two and the thought of getting up to *carpe* the *diem* in the middle of night seemed absurd, but the idea of trying to go back to sleep despite his many failed attempts seemed even more idiotic at that point, so he swung his legs over the edge and pushed himself off the mattress, swaying slightly on his legs before taking a few staggering steps towards the bedroom door. He reached behind his back and pressed his knuckles against his spine with a wince.

The nightmares weren't the only thing keeping him up. Two days had passed since he'd been summoned to the crime scene with the butchered omegas and ever since then, he'd been experiencing an impatient sensation – a shiver – that would blossom just above his tail bone and then spread until it reached the base of his skull, where it eventually subsided and dissipated. While it wasn't painful, it did serve as a distraction – and Will disliked distractions.

He chalked it up to sleep deprivation, possibly combined with the stress and frustration that came with his job. Will's confidence and sense of purpose had taken a major blow a few days ago, and it wasn't impossible that his anxiety was manifesting itself through physical symptoms. He hadn't told Hannibal about it. He supposed he should – but only if it was still an issue by Tuesday. He desperately hoped it wouldn't be.

He sighed dejectedly and made his way down to the kitchen, deciding he needed coffee if he

was going to stay up for the rest of the night. He found the familiar sound of the floorboards creaking under his feet oddly comforting. Wolf Trap wasn't exactly a dream vacation resort and his wooden house certainly wasn't a castle, but it was his home; his sanctuary.

The dogs stirred as he walked past them in the living room, where they were curled up together on the floor, and he quickly let them know that it was him by giving a low hush, clicking his tongue once. Just because *he* couldn't get to sleep, it didn't mean his dogs had to suffer the same fate.

The last few weeks hadn't been easy on them either – Will's vivid hallucinations and his subsequent breakdowns had been keeping them on edge, anxiously unsure of how to help or soothe their master. Will's heart ached at the sudden wave of appreciation and affection that washed over him as he watched them settle back down on the floor. He smiled softly and headed into the kitchen, where he flicked on the light switch to the small lamp above his dinner table, filling the room with a warm, comforting glow.

Once Will had prepared the coffee and collected a box of cereal from one of the cupboards – since he couldn't be bothered to prepare a sandwich – he grabbed the iPad that was resting on the kitchen counter and took a seat by the table. His eyes were stinging as a result of insufficient sleep and his muscles were still cramping up from cold shivers, but the coffee warmed him up from the inside and gradually made him feel a bit better. He activated the pad and immediately went for his preferred news site, shoving a hand down the cereal box to retrieve a fistful of sugary oat puffs.

As he chewed, he scrolled past the headlines he deemed uninteresting until he finally reached one that piqued his interest.

Omega Killer on the loose –
police urges the citizens to be on alert

On October 14th, two boys (aged 15 and 16) made a horrifying discovery in an abandoned factory building – previously belonging to Johnson & Thomson Woodwork, a construction firm that went bankrupt in 1998 – located by route 83, Bentley Springs. Five bodies – all confirmed to be omegas – were found in the basement. The boys immediately alerted the authorities, and the FBI are now searching for the culprit, currently believed to be an alpha.
- Considering the nature of this crime, we do believe that an alpha is behind these murders, states Jack Crawford, lead investigator.
- The victims have all been bitten by the neck. The teeth marks further indicate an alpha killer, as the canines seem to be significantly larger than those typically found in a beta. We're still awaiting lab results to confirm this theory. I'd advice the good people of this city to be on alert – especially omega citizens. This does appear to be a series of biased crimes.

Will scoffed to himself and popped another puff into his mouth.

At least you got that *part right,* he thought dryly. *Even a toddler could've figured that out*.

He closed the article and scrolled down, looking for related news when he suddenly came

across a blog headline. Normally he would've scrolled past it – blogs rarely captured his interest – but this one made him curious. He pinched his eyes and clicked the link. The blog appeared to be run by a true crime enthusiast, who rambled on about the authorities covering things up for several paragraphs and then – at the end of the post – linked to yet another site with the caption: *"Here's what the FBI doesn't want you to see!*"

Will clicked the link – only to immediately regret it.

TattleCrime was a notorious tabloid blog run by a woman named Freddie Lounds. He'd heard of her – and her questionable ethics – but never personally crossed paths with her before. *She* appeared to have crossed paths with *him*, however.

The latest post featured a large, unflattering photograph of him and Jack Crawford – apparently in the midst of the argument that led to Will being dismissed from the crime scene. Will regarded the photo with rapidly building anxiety. He knew he'd been in bad shape that day, but seeing his own face in the photo – greenishly pale and with his hair sticking to his sweaty forehead – made Will wonder how on earth he'd been able to stay on his feet, let alone have a verbal fight with his alpha commander, when he looked as though he was about to keel over at any second.

Lounds seemed to wonder the same thing, because what she wrote about them – Will in particular – was scathing.

What you see here, dear readers, is a brilliant example of the unorthodox methods the FBI will use when faced with a grand-scale issue such as the recent case of the Omega Murders. Will Graham, the man who appears to be suffering from a bad case of the flu, is a "special agent" (I have yet to find an exact definition of his position) who – despite currently undergoing therapy for his mental instability – is assisting with the case.

Approximately three weeks ago, Graham took the life of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, now confirmed to have been the Minnesota Shrike, by firing no less than ten bullets at Hobbs. Ten! One has to wonder why Graham felt it was necessary to fire so many shots. Witnesses from the scene say Graham was visibly distraught following the execution and had to be taken to the hospital.

His therapist (click here for image) can actually be seen accompanying him to the crime scene, which in itself seems like a gross overstep of boundaries, but even so – as you can clearly see – Graham is in no shape to be assisting with the investigation.

Graham has received some acclaim due to his supposed ability to empathize with criminals, thereby making it easy for him to profile perpetrators, but I say – it takes one to know one.

The image above shows him having a heated argument with his commander, Jack Crawford, and clearly not handling it well. What are they fighting about, one might wonder? Perhaps captain Crawford is coming to the realization that Graham is in fact so unstable that he can no longer preform his job? Graham seems to be taking extreme offense – a testament to his mental issues, perhaps? Take a look at that enraged face and decide for yourselves what you believe.

The question remains – with such an uneven team of misfits, are the FBI truly capable of handling this case? Can they ensure the safety of us, the citizens? Or are they merely playing a guessing game led by a mental patient who is suspiciously skilled at understanding the

minds of killers and psychopaths?

(Click here for more images from the Omega Murders crime scene.)

Against his better judgement, Will clicked the link, which in turn activated a slideshow of pictures clearly taken with a low quality digital camera – many of them were taken from odd angles, leading him to theorise that Lounds must've held her camera in such a way that no one at the site would realize what she was doing. Some of them were even taken from inside the basement, but thankfully, Lounds hadn't gained access to the premise until *after* the bodies were removed. Though perhaps she'd waited. Will wasn't sure how low Lounds was prepared to stoop for her sensational pieces, but he sensed that snapping photos of naked murder victims was a bit too distasteful, even for her.

She had, however, snapped several photos of the spray-painted wall and captioned them with questions regarding the intended message and the identity of the killer, urging her readers to share their own theories in the comment section.

Will felt sick. She treated the case as if it was some sort of event – like a game for people to partake in and enjoy. Like it wasn't *real*.

He had been there. He'd seen the bodies, felt the atmosphere of death and decay, smelled the rot.

What this woman was doing was wrong on so many levels, yet she was receiving so much praise from her admirers – people who thought of themselves as vigilantes, anarchists, activists, *special* people with *special* minds. Lounds made them feel extraordinary – perhaps even superior – with her sensational pieces, inviting them to discuss matters that were usually kept confidential, behind the safety and comfort of their computer screens.

The problem with letting ordinary citizens partake in criminal investigations – or rather, the very reason behind keeping certain details strictly classified – was that those not in the know tended to come up with the wildest theories, egging each other on, until the case was so completely distorted and blown out of proportion that the truth was forever lost in translation. Sometimes, in extreme cases, this led to witch hunts and innocent people getting harmed.

Jack was well accustomed with Lounds – he'd take care of her if need be. Will wasn't part of the investigation any longer and had no real obligation to assist, not even with matters such as this one. That said, Lounds had smeared Will on a rather personal level and openly questioned his abilities. He had every right to feel violated.

At three in the morning, however, there really wasn't much Will could do about it. Instead, he took the opportunity to look at the pictures from the crime scene and play with the many theories in his mind. Not because it was his duty, but rather because he couldn't leave it alone.

Will hated to admit it, but Jack had been right – he hadn't been at the top of his game that afternoon. While still utterly convinced that a deranged beta was behind the murders, Will had been too shaken up to consider the smaller details – and those were often the most

important.

He'd terminated his empathy session in the basement much sooner than he normally would – too horrified by what he was experiencing to stick around. It was therefore highly possible that he'd missed something; overlooked certain details. And now that Jack had dismissed him from the case, he no longer had access to crime scene photos, lab results or forensic evidence. He had nothing to go on – except the photos on Freddie Lounds idiotic tabloid blog.

He sighed bitterly and studied the pictures one by one, hating himself for even bothering. The photos weren't very helpful and none of them provided any real clues, what with the bodies missing and all, but Will did find that they triggered his memories – brought him back to the scene, allowing him to at least get a sense of the basement. The sound of dripping, the heavy air that made it hard to breathe… The smells.

Smells. More than one.

He scowled with concentration. The odour of decay was extremely prominent and he'd been too affected by it to take notice of the other palpable notes cutting through the air. A strange, chemical, metallic scent. A remnant of the spray paint? Unlikely, but not impossible. If only he could talk to someone from the forensic unit…

Immense frustration welled up in him – he hated being kept away from an investigation as important as this one. Especially when he knew Jack's faulty theory would only point his team in the wrong direction. Will scrolled angrily through the crime scene photos, finger pressing harder against the screen than necessary, until he finally came to an abrupt stop.

He stared at the screen in confusion for a few seconds, racking his brain to remember the moment captured by Lounds crappy camera. His efforts were futile.

The photo was taken from a distance, but it still offered a very clear view of Will combing his fingers through his sweaty hair – he did remember that part – and Hannibal's gloved hand firmly pressing against the curve of his back. Which perhaps wouldn't have been so stunning to him, or anyone else for that matter, if not for the fact that Will absolutely hated being touched and was extremely unlikely to not notice a hand pressing up against the *curve of his back* - an area known to be sensitive in omegas.

The picture appeared to have been snapped just before they headed back to Hannibal's car. Will remembered the minutes leading up to that moment. Jack had been yelling at him. Will had wanted to yell back, but he'd been too weak and too upset to walk properly. So instead, he'd stayed by Hannibal's side until they decided to leave. That was all he could remember.

Will gaped at the screen, drawing a complete blank.

As if on cue, prickling warmth pooled at the small of his back – just above his tail bone – and wandered up his spine, forcing him to arch his back slightly, until the shiver reached his neck. Will scrunched his eyes shut and waited for it to end. Once it did, he reluctantly refocused on the screen. Studied the way his photographic self appeared to lean into Hannibal's support – completely oblivious to his own actions.

Sickening shame crawled over Will and heated his face.

While it was entirely possible that Hannibal was merely propping Will up due to the fragile condition he'd been in at the time, it still looked too much like an alpha supporting his omega and it made Will incredibly uncomfortable.

Hannibal must have known what that touch implied. The man wasn't oblivious and had always been a perfect gentleman – a well-mannered picture of grace and courtesy. For him to be touching Will in such a familiar manner seemed almost too bold for him.

Then again, Will reminded himself, he remained a beta in the eyes of those surrounding him – Hannibal included. To anyone else looking at the photo, Hannibal's actions would appear innocent. They probably were. And yet, Will's mind couldn't help but to wander off to his darkest, deepest fears.

Does he know?

The sudden, unbidden thought startled him. Will's breath locked in his throat at the prospect. Cold panic seized his chest. If Hannibal did in fact know, it was *possible* – albeit unlikely – that he'd tell Jack about it. And if Jack found out, it was only a matter of time before everyone else knew.

If that happened, Will wasn't sure what he'd do. Uproot his entire life? Move elsewhere? Start over?

The mere idea was exhausting. Not to mention melodramatic. That said, Will couldn't bear the thought of being outed to his co-workers after working so hard to keep his gender under the radar for so long. He'd rather move to Canada and become a preschool teacher.

Will forced himself to take a deep breath.

Stop. You're being crazy.

Will had been in poor shape that day. If Hannibal hadn't been there to support him, he would've likely fallen over and passed out on the ground. Hannibal was a professional, a man of integrity, and the whole reason he was at the crime scene in the first place was to make sure Will remained well and healthy – or, well, as healthy as he *could* be, given the circumstances.

Furthermore, as far as Will knew, Hannibal wasn't one to keep secrets. He'd always informed Will of the things he knew about him, to the point where it actually irritated Will. The man had some impressive deductive skills and wasn't afraid to show them off. If Hannibal did know about his gender, it seemed unlikely that he'd keep it from Will. Unless, of course, he had some hidden ulterior motives.

Will scoffed amusedly at himself.

There you go, being crazy again.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his hands over his face in an effort to chase some of the fatigue away. He felt as though he was coming apart at the seams. Mind reeling and emotions flying. He decided to blame it on the ridiculously early hour. Perhaps a warm shower would do him some good.

He turned the iPad off and stretched his arms up, groaning at the pleasant ache of his muscles loosening up, and cast a quick glance out the window. Paused. Turned back to the window and squinted his eyes.

He scanned the area surrounding his house carefully. It was dark, but he could still make out the silhouette of his car and the trees on his front yard.

After a few moments of concentratedly staring out the window, he scratched his nape and gave a shrug.

Yep. Definitely going crazy.

For a split second, he could've sworn he saw a black stag walking up his driveway.

"You seem distracted today."

Hannibal looked up and quickly rearranged his face into a carefree smile. Bedelia, as usual, did not look convinced. She remained impassive, studying him carefully from her seat, hand folded in her lap. Sometimes Hannibal wondered if it had been a wise decision, asking for her to be his psychiatrist. The woman was sharp and, for the most part, immune to Hannibal's charms. Female alphas were terrifying creatures that way.

"I suppose I am," he replied with an apologetic grin, hoping she'd buy his humble approach. "I find my mind wandering off lately."

"Where to?" She gave him a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. Hannibal regarded her for a moment.

Her silvery blond hair cascaded over her left shoulder in a series of elegant curls and the makeup framing her eyes was flattering in its' subtlety. Hannibal couldn't for the life of him understand how someone so intelligent and pleasing to the eye remained unmated. Female alphas tended to appreciate the company of betas, at least to a somewhat greater extent than male alphas, and there were plenty of those around. But since betas were a generally good natured and light-hearted gender, it was highly possible that Bedelia's intimidating personality scared off any potential suitors. What a curse to live with.

"Work."

“While it’s true that you’re here specifically *because* of your work, I have never known you to be a man whose mind wanders off – especially during your sessions with me,” she pointed out with a slight tilt of her head. “What happened? A new patient proving difficult to handle?”

“I’d say it’s the other way around,” Hannibal admitted. “Handling him takes finesse, I’ll admit, but I find myself enjoying it. I purposely seek out reactions from him, even when it’s uncalled for. While I don’t feel particularly guilty about it, because ultimately, my goal is to help him, I do feel that…” He paused and turned to the window. The refreshing glow from the morning sun lit up Bedelia’s study, clearing his mind. “He captivates me.”

For a few moments, they said nothing. The clock on Bedelia’s wall was the only thing breaking the silence. Eventually, she readjusted in her seat.

“Hannibal,” she started, “to be perfectly frank, it sounds to me like you’re becoming enamoured – and I don’t just mean that in a professionally curious sense. As psychiatrists, we can’t help but to feel drawn to the patients that intrigue us. I’d even go so far as to say it’s in our nature. But if you feel that you’re perhaps getting *too* invested in him, you know what you have to do.”

Hand him over to someone else.

Hannibal couldn’t help the way his fingers twitched in agitation at the prospect and he clenched his fist in an effort to hide it. The thought of directing Will to another therapist, terminating their sessions and being deprived of seeing the younger man, was unpleasant to say the least. Bedelia was right, of course, and had he been in her position, he would’ve recommended the same thing – but that didn’t mean he was going to take her advice.

“I’m unsure of whether my feelings for him exceed those that I normally harbour for patients,” Hannibal lied and flicked away an imagined speck of dust from his knee. “Truthfully, it’s been a long time since I worked with a patient as unstable as him. Mere curiosity is more likely than what you're suggesting.”

Bedelia blinked slowly, lip curving into a polite smile.

“The fact that you aren’t sure is rather damning in itself.”

Hannibal struggled to keep his smile intact, but he was sure Bedelia took notice of how his shoulders tensed up. She leaned back in her chair, chin raised daringly.

“Calm down,” she said, eyes chilly. “I’m not telling you what to do. I’m merely suggesting.”

“Noted. But I maintain that it’s unlikely that I’m about to cross any lines.” He forced himself to relax. “I haven't had the chance to treat anyone with issues as severe as the ones he’s exhibiting in years. I find it fascinating. As a fellow psychiatrist, can you really blame me for that?”

“I suppose not. You have always been a man of principle,” she said with a hand gesture that

suggested a shrug. “I respect you for that and I do think it’s unlikely that you’d take advantage of a patient. But as your therapist, I will not hesitate to go over your head if I suspect that you’re about to break your oath.”

“As is your duty,” Hannibal conceded.

“It’s also my duty to ask uncomfortable questions,” she proceeded, clasping her hands over her knee. “Is this patient an omega?”

They stared at each other in tense silence for a second.

“I believe he is.”

She quirked an elegant brow.

“You *believe* he is?”

“He appears to maintain a beta alter ego,” Hannibal explained. “I’m still unsure as to why this is, but I believe it has to do with his line of work – it’s highly alpha dominated. It seems plausible that he feels more at ease pretending to be a beta under such circumstances.”

“I understand. But if you don’t mind me asking, what led you to believe he’s an omega?”

Hannibal clamped his jaws shut, taking his time to work up a reply. Bedelia didn’t like to be kept waiting, however. With each second of silence that passed, his credibility diminished.

“To be honest,” he said, “it’s just a feeling.”

Even as he said it, he knew it was the wrong thing to say. Bedelia’s gaze hardened.

“A feeling? Or *instinct*?” She questioned. “I don’t have to tell you what it means for an alpha’s instincts to be triggered by an omega. A *male* one at that.”

“I’m aware,” he said, voice sharpening to match hers. “But as I said – it’s just a feeling.”

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a minute. Bedelia leaned back in her seat with a heavy sigh and shook her head softly.

“You’re playing with fire, Hannibal.”

“I’ll maintain a safe distance,” he said, turning his gaze back to window. The damned woman was too skilled at reading him. He’d definitely made a mistake in requesting her for his therapist.

“You say that now,” she said, voice carefully subdued. “Just remember what happened to Icarus.”

The timer she’d set on her phone went off, ending their session.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Error

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Major revision in progress. (March, 2024)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal couldn't remember the last time he felt so agitated he couldn't even enjoy the breakfast that he'd painstakingly prepared for himself, using some of the finest pieces of meat he had left in his freezer. What a stupid waste.

The last few weeks hadn't been uneventful. Ever since Will came into his life, his mind had been so preoccupied with figuring the younger man out that Hannibal hadn't found the time – nor the motivation – to go hunting. Strange, considering how much he normally enjoyed that particular activity.

Hannibal's vision shifted, focusing on his reflection in the window rather than on the parking lot outside. The lines framing his eyes were deeper than normal. Jaw tense.

Bedelia was a woman of wit. She never made needless assumptions – most of what came out of that woman's mouth was unadulterated truth; the blunt, painful kind. Deep down, Hannibal knew she'd been right. He *was* playing with fire – already felt the heat on his skin.

He turned away from the window and walked over to his desk, intending to get started with today's work, to distract himself from any unwanted thoughts – and to pass the time. Franklyn, who normally visited him every Tuesday morning, was bedridden; sick with the flu.

Will's session was scheduled in less than forty minutes, and he'd be damned if he couldn't keep the man out of his head until then. He picked up a small, black remote control and directed it towards a CD player that was discreetly placed at the bottom of one of his many shelves.

The soft melodies of Wagner filled his study and while the soothing music wasn't enough to chase the tension away from his shoulders, it did have a calming effect on his mood.

He tried to concentrate on the stacks of documents awaiting his scrutiny and signature, but after he found that he'd just re-read the same sentence four times – and still failing to make sense of it – he gave up. He reached into his suitcase and grabbed his thermos, craving a cup of his herbal brew.

He unscrewed the plastic plug, inhaled the pleasant aroma of rose and camomile, and picked up a white porcelain cup from his side table. Suddenly, a tremor ran through his hand and

made him drop the cup on the floor. It shattered.

Hannibal stared at the sharp pieces on the floor, still gripping the thermos tightly in his other hand.
He wasn't a superstitious man, yet he couldn't help but to feel like this was a bad omen – a sign of some sort.

Hannibal directed his gaze to his empty hand, studied the way his fingers twitched in dismay. He hadn't expected things to escalate this quickly. Admittedly, it had been careless of him to offer Will a hand of support that day. In hindsight, Hannibal knew it'd been a mistake – like opening a can of worms – but right then and there, it had felt right. He'd been acting on instinct, rather than making a conscious decision. Perhaps he needed to practice some self-restraint.

The more he allowed himself to get drawn in by Will, the harder it got to remain passively observant. His very core responded to Will – pulled him to the younger man, *enticed* him, like a cat to a mouse. While Hannibal had known right from the start that this was a possible outcome – he wasn't so conceited as to believe he was immune to omega pheromones – he hadn't expected himself to get pulled under so easily. For all his experience, knowledge and sturdy confidence, Hannibal found himself unsure of how to proceed.

It forced him to re-evaluate his intentions; what was he thinking? What exactly did he want from Will?

Initially, Will had presented himself as an object of curiosity – a rare being to examine and experiment on. Hannibal had encountered male omegas in the past, but Will was different in many regards. Aside from the fact that he'd kept his gender a secret for several years – which was no small feat, really – Will was unmated and seemed highly reluctant to rely on anyone other than himself. It inspired a begrudging sense of respect in Hannibal.

Unlike many other alphas, Hannibal had never considered himself a necessity to an omega's health. Omegas were capable creatures, perfectly able to care for themselves if need be, but for an omega to *choose* to be alone? Virtually unheard of. And there was no shortage of alphas in the eager pursuit of an omega partner, so it wasn't as though it'd be impossible for Will to find someone, should he ever want to. Though, he reminded himself, male omegas were generally treated differently than female ones. It left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. He supposed he couldn't blame Will for keeping a distance.

And yet...

He recalled the feel of Will's back moving under his hand – how the muscles had stretched and arched before settling against his palm, quietly accepting his support. Whether Will had been aware of it or not, he'd accepted Hannibal. He'd *allowed* Hannibal's touch. The thought sent a shiver down Hannibal's spine.

For Will, who at first glance appeared so utterly ordinary, to have such an immense effect on him... It was as intriguing as it was infuriating.

He curled his fingers into a tight fist, released a breath and placed the thermos on his desk before crouching down to collect the pieces, which he then placed on the side table.

Just as he reached out for a new cup, there was a knock at the door. Hannibal checked his wrist watch. Will's session was still a half hour away, and yet, Hannibal found himself hoping that the man had decided to show up early. When another knock came, however, he realized it came from his private exit. Will never used that door. Hannibal walked over to open the door and was met with Jack Crawford's troubled scowl.

"Jack," he gave a greeting nod. "What brings you here?"

Jack invited himself into the study and Hannibal decided to allow it, not in the mood for any childish displays of alpha dominance.

"No client this morning?" Jack pondered and sent Hannibal a questioning look.

"I had a cancellation," Hannibal explained and took a seat behind his desk, waiting for Jack to announce his reason for visiting him.

"I see," Jack sighed and gave a slow nod, looking uncomfortably unsure of what to say. The atmosphere turned awkward fast – after all, their last encounter hadn't been overly pleasant, what with Hannibal witnessing Jack and Will's heated brawl and all.

"How can I help you, Jack?" Hannibal urged gently, leaning back in his chair. Jack gave a quick, polite smile and put his hands in his pockets, attempting a more relaxed stance.

"I'd like to first apologize for how I behaved the last time we saw each other," he said with a grimace of remorse. "I was overly harsh on Will and it must have put you in an odd position."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, I mean," Jack looked even more uncomfortable, "you were there to be his anchor of support, so I'm sure you must've felt torn watching us fight."

Hannibal struggled to keep from grinning with amusement. Jack seemed to be under the delusion that Hannibal had wanted to take his side over Will's. Oh well – might as well indulge the other man. Hannibal had nothing to gain by making Jack Crawford his enemy.

"I suppose," he said with a reassuring smile. "But rest assured, my opinion of you remains intact. I'm sure it was a difficult situation for you."

"It was," Jack nodded and took a seat on the wooden chair in front of the desk. "To be honest, I still feel guilty for bringing him back on so soon. He clearly wasn't ready for it."

"So it would seem."

"Do you think I made it worse? I mean… Did I put too much pressure on him?" Jack seemed genuinely troubled. "Alana will have my head if she finds out I brought him on, only for him

to, well, *lash out* the way he did."

"Will's goal was always to go back to work as soon as possible – he told me so during our very first session," Hannibal said, fixing his face into a more contemplative look. "He's very dedicated that way. I had hoped that an early return to the job would be good for him – maybe I was hasty in my assessment. Perhaps he does need more time. But I don't blame you, Jack. Will is a crucial part of your team, after all."

"Yeah…" Jack scratched his chin thoughtfully. "But as much as I hate to admit it, Alana was right. Will needs to heal. I think it's clear that his head isn't in the right place yet, and until it is, he's of no use."

Hannibal said nothing, opting instead for a neutral smile that Jack could interpret any way he wanted.

"But it leaves us without a psycho-analyser for now," Jack continued, giving Hannibal a look. "Which is why I'm here. I was actually hoping you'd be willing to fill Will's shoes for a while – just until he gets better. After all, you were originally brought on to assist with the cases."

That wasn't entirely true, but since it was apparently what Jack needed to tell himself, Hannibal appeased him with a nod.

"I see," he said. "You need me to help you put together a profile?"

"Yes," Jack confirmed. "Don't get me wrong – the BSU agents at my disposal are skilled in their respective fields, but we've been relying heavily on Will ever since he joined the team. We could really use someone with a keen eye for the psychological aspects."

"Criminal minds do fascinate me," Hannibal admitted, "but I feel obliged to point out that it's not my area of expertise."

"I'm aware," Jack said with a complying grin. "It's not my intention to put you in a difficult position. I just thought I'd ask. If you decline, I'll have to ask Alana instead, and frankly," he paused to make a grimace of unwillingness, "I'd rather not."

"I'd be willing to assist in any way I can," Hannibal said, and then – feigning innocence – he added, "but I thought you already had a theory to go on?"

A nerve in Jack's eyebrow twitched at this, but he made an admirable attempt to appear untroubled.

"Oh, we do," he said, lips stretching into a thin smile, "but so far, all we know is that we're most likely looking at an alpha. We know little to nothing about his mental state, or even what kind of life he leads outside his more… *unorthodox* interests. That's where you come in. We need you to help us look for anything that might lead us in the direction of who he *is*, outside of his killer persona. Age, personality, profession..."

A hot twinge of irritation blossomed in Hannibal's chest. Jack's words had an unexpectedly agitating effect on him. Hannibal couldn't say for certain that Will's theories were correct, but for Jack to completely throw them out, only to immediately seek Hannibal's advice instead? All because of Jack's pride? Disgraceful.

"I understand," Hannibal said and managed a graceful nod. "But honestly, Jack, I can't promise I'll do a better job than Will."

"But maybe you'll do a better job than the Will we saw last Friday," Jack said and gave Hannibal a pointed look. "You have to admit that he wasn't exactly… clear-headed."

Another twinge of irritation made itself known, making it increasingly difficult for Hannibal to keep his facial expression under control. He gritted his teeth, barely registering how his fingers dug into the arm rests of his chair. He tipped his head back and gave a contemplative hum.

"Can you blame him?" He asked, voice subdued. "You seemed awfully distressed by that same crime scene, and Will was still learning how to cope with the guilt of having taken a man's life. He's bound to be on edge."

"I certainly don't blame him. I agree with everything you just said," Jack said, tone indignant. "And that's precisely why I want him off the case. He's already unravelling, and I'm sure as hell not going to put pressure on someone who's…" He paused, struggling to find the right words, and then sighed in defeat. "I shouldn't have asked him to return that soon. It was my mistake – and I'm a man who *learns* from his mistakes, doctor. If Will breaks permanently, I'll have lost one of my finest agents."

"Careful, Jack. The way you're speaking right now makes it sound as though you consider Will a damaged object," Hannibal observed, sending Jack a chilly look. "You might want to reconsider how you address your subordinates."

"I assure you," Jack said, voice trembling ever so slightly from withheld anger, "that I'm perfectly capable of dealing with my subordinates. What happened with Will last week was due to an error of judgement, one that I regret deeply, but let me remind you that I sought your advice beforehand, and *you* said he could handle it." Jack jabbed a finger in Hannibal's direction. "I will not have you question my ethics because I made a mistake. I have the utmost respect for my agents – including Will. But right now, he's unwell and, as such, unfit for duty. For God's sake, doctor, he's your *patient*. You of all people should understand."

Somehow, Hannibal managed to restrain himself. Took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. Reminding himself that it'd be better to be Jack's ally rather than his enemy, Hannibal pulled back.

"You're right. My apologies." Hannibal gave Jack a humble nod. "Perhaps my own error of judgement is eating away at me. I do, after all, carry some of the weight of what happened to Will last week."

Jack leaned back in his seat, clearly appeased, and cleared his throat.

“Right. Well. We’re all under a bit of pressure.”

Hannibal gave a rueful smile and nodded, focusing on keeping his breathing even. Some day, he hoped he’d have the pleasure of roasting Jack Crawford’s loins and serving them to Will. Perhaps with a nice ensemble of spinach and baked potatoes. Garlic cream. And a sauce made of shallot and red wine.

“So do we have a deal?” Jack asked, ripping Hannibal away from his brief daydream. “Or am I going to have to seek Alana’s advice instead?”

Hannibal blinked slowly, releasing a tight breath through his nose. Jack was already agitated. If Hannibal refused, their current semi-friendly relationship would likely be tarnished. Hannibal couldn’t have that. Having the BSU commander on his side was invaluable.

“We have a deal,” Hannibal conceded and reached out his hand. Jack grasped it and gave a firm shake. “I’ll help you profile the culprit in Will’s stead.”

“Terrific,” Jack said, looking pleased. “Well then. I’ll give you a call if we need assistance.”

He headed for the door through which he’d entered earlier, but just as he was about to reach out and grab the knob, he sent Hannibal a careful glance over his shoulder.

“Might be best if you don’t tell Will about this.”

“I agree,” Hannibal said, “but if he asks, I won’t lie.”

Jack heaved a deep sigh, as though he’d expected Hannibal to say exactly that, and gave a slow, begrudging nod. He opened the door and exited the room without another word. Hannibal leaned back in his chair, irritation simmering just beneath his skin.

What a goddamned farce. Jack Crawford wasn’t looking for a proper profiler – he was looking for someone who’d agree with him. Someone who’d confirm his theories and stroke his ego. And now, *Hannibal*, of all people, had been given that unpleasant task. No wonder Jack preferred him over Alana – she’d just give him a hard time. Jack hated it when others disagreed with him. This meant that if Hannibal wanted to keep Jack on his side, he’d have to make sure *not* to disagree with him.

A shudder of furious reluctance ran up his spine. Hannibal Lecter wasn’t some incompetent yes-man, so the fact that Jack would likely be treating him such – and the fact that he’d have to tolerate it – was enough to make him feel sick to his stomach.

Deciding he needed something stronger than tea, Hannibal got up and walked over to his drinks cabinet. He was half-way there when he idly glanced towards the dark hallway and stopped dead in his tracks.

The door leading to the waiting room was open, and while the waiting room was dark, it wasn’t empty. Will leaned tiredly against the door frame, gaze low. For a brief second,

Hannibal hoped that Will had only just arrived and thereby missed his conversation with Jack, but when Will slowly walked into the study with stiff, deliberate steps and an angry scowl forming on his face, that hope abandoned Hannibal rather swiftly.

“Will.” Hannibal forced himself to smile calmly. “Didn’t expect you for another fifteen minutes.”

This was an error on his part. He'd been careless. After all, this wasn't the first time Will had arrived early, nor, he bitterly reminded himself, was it the first time he'd overheard a conversation held in Hannibal's office. Hannibal cursed himself for not being more cautious.

“Clearly,” Will seethed, speaking through tightly pressed together teeth. “After all, you wouldn’t have a secret meeting with my boss if you thought I’d be standing just outside, hearing everything.” Will stopped a few short steps away from him and finally raised his chin, eyes locking with Hannibal’s. The glare Will was producing was impressive in its intensity. “Would you care to explain to me what the hell just happened? Did you just *steal* my job?”

“Technically, it was given to me,” Hannibal replied. Will released a shaky scoff, smiling incredulously at him.

“Fucking technicalities,” he laughed joylessly. “And here I thought you were on my side. When I realized that Jack was here, I actually thought that you’d…” He paused to shake his head, narrowing his eyes. “I thought you’d called him to talk him about what happened last week. I thought you’d try to convince him that I was right. Because *technically*, you said that you thought I was right. I asked you, and you *said* that you didn’t think I was too unstable to work!”

“Will, calm do-“

“So imagine my surprise when I realized that the reason Jack was here was to convince YOU to work the case instead, since I’m so goddamned ‘unfit for duty’! And you actually *agreed*!?” Will’s chest heaved, breathing quick and angry. His eyes were wide with fury, the blue of his irises in stark contrast against the reddening whites. Hannibal’s head was starting to hurt.

“I didn’t have much choice,” he said, to no avail. Will took an angry step forward, baring his teeth.

“Don’t give me that! You weren't the only option, just the most convenient one. Jack said so himself! So I’m going to ask you again – knowing *exactly* how important my work is to me, did you just agree to replace me?”

“Jack asked for my help and I saw no reason to turn him down,” Hannibal stated. The ache across his skull increased. “It’s only until you get better. He values you deeply.”

“Right, he just has a funny way of showing it.” Will dragged an agitated hand though his hair. “And what do you mean, ‘until I get better’? *You* were the one who said I was ready to go

back! Did you say that just to make me feel better? Damnit, Hannibal!" The look Will gave him was as hurt as it was angry. "I trusted you."

"Will, I know this must be difficult," Hannibal started, took a step towards Will and reached out a hand, hoping to soothe him – to remove the pain in his eyes. "But it's not-"

Will slapped his hand away with an aggressive snarl. White noise filled the inside of Hannibal's ears, making it difficult for him to hear what Will said next. He stared at his hand. Four days ago, Will had accepted that hand. Tolerated its' touch. Leaned into it. Now, it had been rejected.

Rejection was... unpleasant.

"Spare me," Will spat, eyes glowing with rage. "I'm so goddamned sick of you pretending to *know* me. You're just like the rest of them. You don't know *anything.*"

Hannibal's gaze snapped back to Will. Any notion of wanting to soothe the younger man was replaced by something else – something stronger. Darker. It made his back straighten, shoulders squaring. He took a calm step towards Will, and then another one. He said nothing. Will's eyes flickered uncertainly. He backed up, towards the bookshelves.

Once Will's back collided with the shelves, his eyes widened in something akin to fear as he snapped his head back to glare defiantly at Hannibal. Slowly, Hannibal extended his arms and placed each hand on the sides of Will's head, effectively trapping the younger man.

"Let's talk about this calmly, shall we?" Hannibal drawled, sending Will a soft smirk. The tendons in Will's throat moved as he swallowed, nostrils flaring in uneasiness. "What exactly is it that you think I don't know?" He leaned in closer, made sure to tower over Will in a way that would either force Will to bend his neck to look up at him – or *bow* his head in submission.

When Will chose the former, Hannibal had to grit his teeth to suppress the heated shudder that danced across his skin.

Bold.

"There's a lot you don't know about me," Will muttered, bravely looking straight into Hannibal's eyes. Hannibal studied the way Will's pupils rapidly increased in size. Revelled in how Will's breathing turned heavy.

"Is there, now?" Hannibal challenged, minimizing the gap between himself and Will by taking a small step closer – their frames a mere inch away from one another. Suddenly, Will tensed up. His gaze broke away from Hannibal's as his breath hitched and he pressed himself closer to the shelf, ducking his chin. Hannibal took notice of the way his shoulders trembled and stiffened. Shivering.

On instinct, Hannibal brought his hand into the gap between the shelf and Will's back, running his fingers up the younger man's spine. This coerced a fascinating response. Will

threw his head back, eyes scrunched tightly shut as he choked on a stuttering gasp. His hands snapped up to push at Hannibal's shoulders. Hannibal licked his lips and leaned in closer. Will's throat clicked loudly as he swallowed and his voice was husky when he spoke.

"Stop-"

Before Will had the chance to say or do anything else, Hannibal rubbed his jaw against Will's cheek. Will's natural scent still didn't cut through the artificial smell of sandalwood, but Hannibal relished in the knowledge that his own scent would be mixed in there – that Will would carry *his* scent, at least for a couple of hours. Will stilled completely against him. His breathing was shallow and rapid in Hannibal's ear. Hannibal's hand was still firmly pressing up against the curve of Will's spine – even through the layers of clothing, the touch was warm. The muscles clenched and unclenched under his fingers, until finally, they gave in.

Will's back arched beautifully, curved towards him, pressing their chests together. Desire made his blood boil. Hannibal's hand pressed tighter, pulling the omega closer. A silent whimper escaped Will, whose hands appeared to still be struggling against the embrace – to no avail. The omega strained against him. Hannibal smiled cruelly against his sweaty temple.

"I really wish you'd stop wearing this cheap beta cologne," he said, leaning back just enough so that he could look into Will's panicked eyes. "It doesn't suit you at all."

With surprising strength, Will shoved away from Hannibal, forcing the alpha to take a few staggering steps back, which bought him enough time to dash through the hallway and out the door.

Hannibal stared after him in bewildered wonder. The sound of Will's rapid footsteps down the stairway brought him back to reality and he cursed himself for his lack of self-restraint.

Should I go after him?

No. Opting to give the younger man some space – and sensing that his presence would be far from welcome – Hannibal fixed himself a drink and took a seat behind his desk, ignoring the way his hand still prickled from Will's body heat and the smouldering arousal coursing through his veins. He sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Goddamnit.

Will rushed across the parking lot, glancing over his shoulder a few times to make sure Hannibal wasn't following him. Once he reached his car, it took nearly a minute for him to unlock the door, hands shaking too much to hold the keys steady.

Once he was inside, he put the keys into the ignition and was just about to fire up the engine when he froze. The sensation was so foreign that he hadn't realized what it was until now. Hadn't stopped to consider it, getting away from Hannibal being his main priority. But as it

dawned on him, there was no escape.

“Oh no. No, no, no…” He mumbled, closing his eyes in denial.

Slick.

Will’s breath hitched in panic as he reluctantly peered down, taking in the state of his crotch. The tent just beneath his zipper was rather telling in itself – but erections weren’t as alien to Will. They occurred with regular intervals whether he liked it or not. More often than not, he ignored the problem until it went away. But this was decidedly different.

Will took a steadying breath and focused on steering the vehicle until he reached the main road. Praying every silent prayer he knew that it would go away, simmer down. He swallowed tightly, trying his best to ignore the way his face heated up. His pulse was still thundering away, heart thudding heavily in his chest. Will cleared his throat and turned on the radio. The generic pop music didn’t help. Breathing was so goddamned difficult. Why was the air so heavy?

Will decided to breathe slowly through his nose in an effort to regain some inkling of self-control. He’d left the city behind, thankfully already driving through a large forest area that separated Baltimore from Washington, but the drive from there to Wolf Trap wasn’t short. He’d end up in a ditch if he wasn’t careful.

Shit. I can’t. I can’t drive all the way home like this.

Cursing silently to himself, Will slowed down, veering off the main road to an old forest path. Once he felt he was far enough into the forest that his car wouldn’t be spotted from the main road, he parked the car and turned the radio off.

Feeling like a complete idiot, he unzipped his pants, threw a worried glance back to make sure he didn’t have an audience, and pulled them down along with his underwear, just far enough to release his cock. He hissed as it made contact with the chilly air. The head was already turning red, glistening wantonly. It was so unseemly that Will found it hard to look directly at it, opting instead to close his eyes as his fingers encircled the hard flesh.

The reaction was instantaneous. His back snapped away from the seat as jolts of pleasure shot up from his groin, through his stomach and chest, down his legs until the sensation reached his feet and forced him to curl his toes in delight.

Will grunted as memories flashed before his inner vision, hand picking up speed as he recalled the way Hannibal had gazed down at him. Those intense eyes. The little smirk playing at the corners of his lips. Will gasped and held his breath as spikes of intense desire pierced through him and made his heart slam against his rib cage. His hand paused. It wasn't enough.

In a desperate, dazed flurry, Will tugged his pants down further and pulled up one knee. With one hand still firmly grasping his weeping dick, the other hand made its insecure way further down. Will tilted himself slightly to the side for a better reach. Once his fingers made contact

with the slick, what remained of his inhibitions abandoned him completely. He reached further, grazing the puckered opening with his index finger. A series of electric jolts went up his spine at the sensation.

The moan he'd been holding in escaped him now, vibrating through his ribcage, and he snatched his hand back, as if burned. It was too much.

This was all Hannibal's fault.

I hate him.

"Fuck!" He gasped, concentrating instead on pumping his erection. Let this end soon. God, let it end. The muscles of his back protested as they stretched and curved, sweat soaking into his shirt.

Against his will, the images of Hannibal towering over him continued to harass him - the phantom sensation of Hannibal's hand pressing against his back.

The image turned into fantasy. Hannibal's scent - something musky and citrusy, like bergamot - lingered on his skin, prominent despite the sandalwood. Will's mind provided him with a new scenario and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The imaginary hand that had been pressing against Will's back was now holding him down against the car seat, keeping him in place. *Firmly*. Hannibal was above him.

I want him.

Hannibal would press his nose against Will's nape, rub his jaw against Will's slick skin, mix their scents together and then he'd open his mouth to nibble at his neck and Will would tilt his head and present his neck to the alpha, let him do whatever the hell he wanted-

Will's pressed half of his sweaty face against the rough fabric of the seat, only to suddenly snap his head back as he came. His skin crackled with energy, relieved satisfaction tearing through his body, until his breathing slowed down.

Once the orgasm subsided, Will was left feeling as though the bones in his body had turned to rubber. His legs shook from exertion, left ankle was cramping up, and Will sank back into the car seat with an exhausted sigh.

As the afterglow left him, it was immediately replaced by a much less pleasant feeling.

"Oh god…" Will peered down and took in the soiled state of his jacket – flecks of his cum soaking into the fabric. Disgusted with himself, Will managed to shrug the jacket off and fold it, before throwing it to the backseat. He then proceeded to pull his pants up, movements harsh and shaky.

He had no tissues or wet wipes with him. Not even a water bottle. There was nothing he could use to clean himself up. The entire car reeked of sweat and lust.

Grunting with displeasure, Will twisted his body in an effort to sit up straighter.

And then, he just sat there for what felt like hours. Staring out into the peaceful forest. Heard the chirping of birds and the whisper of the wind dancing through the tree branches. Absentmindedly, he opened the door to let some fresh air in. Another few minutes of complete serenity passed.

Finally, a quiet sob wrecked through his body. And another one. Salt stung in his eyes. Angry tears streaked down his cheeks and he wiped them away using the back of his hand, feeling nauseated and beaten.

"Never let the harlot out, son."

Will closed his eyes and pressed his palms over them. Pressed until he started seeing odd flecks of colour and shapes behind his eyelids and he slowly came back to himself.

Once he'd calmed down, he started the engine. Turned on the radio. Took a deep breath. Returned to the main road. Ignored how loose and relaxed his muscles felt. Ignored how his head felt lighter. Ignored how the colours of the autumn leaves seemed brighter than before.

For the remainder of the drive back to Wolf Trap, he repeated the same mantra over and over again in his head. Eventually, he told himself, it'd become truth.

I hate him.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Answers

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Major revision in progress. March, 2024

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Will got back home, the reality of the situation had finally started to sink in, hitting him hard. So hard, in fact, that Will found himself unable to leave his car. Instead, he remained seated, squeezing the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were turning white. The stink of lust was still extremely prominent and stung the insides of his nostrils like acid. In the backseat, his soiled jacket rested on the floor. He couldn't bring himself to turn and look at it.

Despite his painful grip on the steering wheel, Will was maintaining a forced sort of calm on the outside. He blinked slowly. Took deep breaths. Recounted the morning step by step in his head, desperate to sort his mind out and look at the situation from a rational perspective.

He'd touched himself. More to the point, for a split second he'd actually *enjoyed* it – for the first time since, well, ever.

There had been a rare few times, during unusually intense heats, when his hypersensitized body would practically *force* him to stimulate himself just to keep the needy ache at bay. His suppressants generally did a good job keeping most preheat and heat symptoms to an absolute minimum, so on the rare occasion that arousal did occur, it was like having an unpleasant itch. Masturbating had therefore been a rather mundane task, and while the act undeniably brought him a sense of relief, it didn't necessarily feel *good*.

Just thinking back on what he'd just done made his face burn in shame. Above all, however, he felt confused.

The suppressants should've been enough to keep his instincts in check and, frankly, sex had never really been on his agenda. He worked with alphas on a regular basis and had never reacted this way before. Will just didn't consider himself a person who would ever need to do something like that, even if he *didn't* take those damned pills.

Those damned pills.

Will considered his daily usage. Fifteen years. His breathing went shallow when something he'd neatly tucked away in the deepest, darkest corner of his mind started trickling into his awareness. Like black water color seeping into clear water. Dread.

Don't let it be that. *Please, don't let it be that.*

Immediately determined to spend the rest of the day looking for answers that pointed in a completely different direction than the barrel he'd have to face otherwise, Will shoved those thoughts away, only to have his mind instantly lock onto another thoroughly unpleasant fact.

Hannibal knew that he was an omega.

Inhaling sharply through his nose to beat the nausea back, Will closed his eyes and focused on the sound of his own breathing as he hesitantly, reluctantly, thought back to his earlier encounter with the alpha.

"*I really wish you'd stop wearing that cheap beta cologne. It doesn't suit you at all*."

Hannibal's clean-shaven jaw against his cheek. His natural musk that complimented the aftershave he wore and created a symphony of fragrances, a scent Will could only really describe as *Alpha*. Heady citrus, masculine, fucking delectable. His hand on Will's back. Intense eyes looking down at him. The irresistible need for closeness that had sparked to life within Will…

He swallowed tightly and snapped his eyes open, ignored the heat pooling in his gut and the brief blurriness of his vision. There was no doubt about it. Hannibal *knew*. Will didn't know *how* he knew, but he did. Thinking back to the photograph of Hannibal pressing his hand up against Will's back, it suddenly occurred to him that Hannibal may, in fact, have known about Will's gender for some time - and kept it a secret.

Realizing he was on the verge of hyperventilating, Will scrambled to open the door and stumbled out of the car, landing with his knees on the gravel of his driveway. Suffocating panic coursed through his veins as he struggled to get up, feeling like he was moving in slow motion.

He cast a glance towards his house and realized that a few of his dogs were watching him from the windows, barking in concern. Feeling a pinch of affection blossom in his chest at the sight, he straightened and raised a hand to show the worried canines that he was alright - though it was becoming increasingly obvious to himself that he wasn't. He leaned his back against the car and turned his face up, squinting his eyes as he gazed up into the never-ending pool of gray that was the autumn sky.

The sheer volume of thoughts and feelings he needed to sort through was overwhelming. He needed to get inside. Take a shower. Scrub himself clean. His lower abdomen was splattered with semen that, to his intense dismay, had dried up and started *flaking*. He shuddered in disgust. His clothes smelled of sweat. It pained him to use his hands for anything, given where they'd been just a short while ago. He'd have to give his car a thorough wash, too. And collect that damned jacket…

The nausea suddenly returned in full. Without warning, bile rose in his throat. Will slapped a hand over his mouth and forced himself to take deep breaths, swallowing hard to force it back down. No matter how hard he tried, however, he couldn't stop his mind from racing. Images and flashbacks from the past couple of hours kept harassing him.

Will bent over and threw up on the ground.

Days passed without anything in particular stirring up the make-belief peace that Will fought so goddamned hard to create and maintain. The self-loathing followed him around like a second shadow, but there were ways that he could keep the darkness at bay. One of those ways was to consume alcohol. Lots and lots of alcohol.

It was during one such alcohol-induced moment that Will finally gathered up his courage and searched for answers. *Different* answers. He took a seat by the window in his kitchen and picked his iPad up.

Will had been consuming the same brand of suppressants since he was a teenager. His father had brought him the first jar, and Will had clung to the medication ever since. Like an idiot.

He opened safari with trembling fingers and searched.

Omega suppressants don't work

Clumsy phrasing, courtesy of the whiskey, but it did the trick. The first result that came up was a webMD site, explaining in lengthy detail that different brands of suppressants varied in efficiency and that omegas who experience that their suppressant failed to meet their expectations should see a doctor and change their prescription.

That didn't satisfy Will's need for answers. The ones he'd been on had worked wonders for well over a decade. Was *Hannibal* somehow the triggering factor? All of Will's problems had started with him, after all. Some of this, his drunken mind decided, *had* to be his fault. He took another swig from his glass, further dousing his brain in sweet, hazy fog before he typed in another search.

Can omega be allergic to alpha?

He stared at his screen for a second. Despite being drunk off his ass, he understood just what an idiotic question that was. He erased it and typed in new words.

Omega suppressants ineffective due to specific alpha

He doubted he'd find any satisfactory results. The phrasing was too wordy and he still felt like he was asking the wrong questions, but he tapped the GO button anyway.

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes when the first two results that came up were Yahoo pages, but decided to click on the first one just to see if maybe there were others out there experiencing the same problems he did.

“Im a beta and last week I took a few of my sister’s omega pills as a joke, and now I get super horny every time I see my alpha teacher. Did I turn myself into an omega?”

Best answer: No, you moron. Read a biology book. Betas can only be turned into omegas by praying to Satan and bathing in an alphas jizz, in that specific order. Don’t you kids know anything? lol
- By: BetaBot

Will groaned to himself and went back to the result list. He scrolled down to see if there were any credible results, but only came across a few reddit pages and unrelated holistic medicine pages. Sighing heavily, he briefly wondered if maybe he should just call the hospital and have them check him out. The itch in his head was as persistent as it was irritating. He decided to type in one last search.

Omega unresponsive to suppressants

This time, to his relief, an article from a medical journal came up at the top. Will prayed a silent prayer and clicked on the link.

Suppressant medicine – a modern miracle
Known consequences of misuse

With the introduction of omega suppressant medication in the early 20th century came new possibilities for omegas in terms of education and career choices. Of course, the early suppressants came with a series of unpleasant side effects (Known Side Effects Of Early Omega Suppressants) but over the decades that followed, suppressants evolved and improved and the standard suppressant medication available today is highly effective with minimal side effects.

What we do know is that it is possible for an omega who has been consuming the same suppressant medication for many years to experience a drop in the medication’s potency, but it should be pointed out that this is often due to hormonal changes that occur naturally with age, and not an issue of misuse. Omegas who experience a change in how they respond to their suppressant medication should seek medical advice to find suppressant medication that suits them.

Another – more uncommon – way for omegas to become unresponsive to their suppressant medication is overconsumption.

Will’s breath froze in his lunges. Oh no.

Suppressant medication is specifically intended to be taken during heat periods. However, there have been cases of omegas who use their suppressant medication to conceal their gender due to social stigma and discrimination, or to reduce anxiety based on their gender identity. Some omegas have been known to misuse suppressant medication for several years. While overconsumption is not lethal, it is not without consequence. Omegas who misuse suppressant medication may experience depression, abnormal fatigue, sluggishness, loss of appetite, loss of sex drive, irritability, etc. If the misuse goes on for an extended period of

time, the omega may finally find her/himself suddenly unresponsive to the medication; that is, the suppressing agents have been rendered ineffective.

Often, this is brought on by a sudden exposure to potent alpha pheromones, triggering an attraction strong enough that it would cause dormant omega hormones to respond – essentially trumping the suppressant medicine. This may be a shocking and frightening experience for the omega, but thankfully, it can be remedied.

The immunity is not chronic, but may last for several months – or longer, should the omega not take the appropriate measures to stabilize the onslaught of hormones. Omegas who have become temporarily unresponsive to their suppressants are advised to immediately stop taking their suppressant medication and seek medical attention. Eventually, the omega should be able to continue using suppressant medication, preferably as intended – during heat periods only.

If the affected omega has actively suppressed their heat cycles for a consecutive number of years, he or she may experience very intense and painful heat periods and are strongly advised to seek medical assistance during such times. Or, if possible, spend their heat period with a suitable alpha.

- Sarah M. Jenkins, M.D. (link)

Will's vision blurred. He stared at the screen until his eyes started stinging.

There was no getting away from it. No alternative explanations to be found.

He'd taken one pill a day.

Every single day.

For fifteen years.

Will heaved a tired sigh. Eventually, his shoulders sagged in defeat.

Enough, he told himself. *You knew this could happen. You* knew*, you idiot.*

His relationship with suppressants had always been unhealthy. But after getting through those first couple of years without issue, Will had started to relax. Gotten cocky, comfortable. Convinced it wouldn't happen to him. It had been forgotten; buried deep under several thick layers of denial. And fear. And desperation.

But the simple truth was this; Will had been using his suppressants the wrong way, for the wrong reasons, for far too long.

Denial was a powerful thing – until it suddenly wasn't.

One significant detail that Sarah M Jenkins had pointed out, and that he gratefully clung to like a lifeline of saving grace, was that in a way, he'd been right; some of this really *did* seem

to be Hannibal's fault. Will stared grimly at the screen, eyes burning holes into one sentence in particular.

'*Often, this is brought on by a sudden exposure to potent alpha pheromones, triggering an attraction strong enough…'*

Potent alpha pheromones. Attraction.

"I need another drink," Will muttered to no one and stumbled towards the kitchen, feeling as though the last drop of energy trickled out of him as he sat back down by the table. His glass of whiskey still had a few sips left in it and Will chugged them all down in one go, grimacing as the liquid burned in his throat.

His primary impulse was to scream, turn his house upside down and convince himself that it was all just a bad dream, but he somehow managed to keep the rage down, allowing instead for cold resignation to wash over him.

He picked up his tablet once more and went on his email account. He quickly composed an email to the BSU admin stating his intentions regarding his mandatory therapy – and that his sick leave, which he'd dubbed his dismissal because Will didn't care much for technicalities, needed to be extended.

After that, he composed a new email.

Hannibal,

I want to terminate our sessions.

- Will Graham

As he hit the 'send' button, Will struggled to grasp what he was feeling. Part of him felt relieved, while another part of him… didn't.

Hannibal's scent on his skin had long since vanished.

Bergamot, his memory provided. That was it. *And green tea.*

This was for the best. It was Hannibal's fault anyway. Him and his potent fucking pheromones. And he'd definitely crossed a line last time Will had seen him. A line that had been in place for a reason. Cutting ties with him was the only solution. Well, *that*, or drinking himself into oblivion. The former seemed healthier.

He was just about to put the iPad down and head for the bathroom to take a long, painfully hot shower when a notification popped up. His preferred news site had published a new article. Begrudging curiosity welled up in him and he tapped the screen, promising himself that he was just going to take a quick look.

That promise was immediately revoked when he saw the headline.

Omega killer strikes again.

Hannibal was breaking plenty of his personal rules by driving to Wolf Trap that Tuesday morning. Canceling that many appointments in one day felt like a defeat, a crack in his otherwise impeccable image. And he never made home visits. But Hannibal knew he'd crossed a line with Will. He'd made a mistake that day, and the idea of leaving it be and moving on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened did not sit right with him. It sat very wrong with him. Like an insect bite that begged to be scratched. One knew it would be best to simply leave it be, but the itch was impossible to ignore.

Will had wanted him to back off. Hannibal had decidedly *not* backed off.

It wasn't the slightest bit surprising that Will wanted to terminate his sessions. What *was* perhaps a bit surprising, was the reaction Hannibal had to the prospect of not seeing the omega again.

Will Graham was deceptively dull on the surface, like a coin that hadn't been polished in many years. But Hannibal had glimpsed the gold beneath the grime. So much potential. So frustratingly determined to hide the very things that made him valuable. Hannibal had the inexplicable and unrelenting urge to scrub that dirt away; see if he could make the coin shine.

Even if Will refused to take him back as his therapist, Hannibal wanted to apologize. It wasn't just the gentlemanly thing to do - he needed to find an anchor. Something that tied them together, as friends, or even as acquaintances. Something that made it possible for Hannibal to remain a part of Will's life. Being cut out completely was simply not an option.

Eventually, Will's house came into sight. He steered his car up on the driveway and parked it. He detected no motion from the house. It was as though the building itself was sleeping. Perhaps Will was, too?

He exited the vehicle and took the nature surrounding Will's house in. Marvelled at how different it was from the city. The air was cleaner and the sky seemed clearer. He understood why Will had chosen to reside there.

He walked up to the porch and gently tapped his knuckles against the door. A choir of dogs barking came from within the house. He couldn't help but to smile. If Will *was* asleep and Hannibal's knocks hadn't been enough to wake him, those dogs surely did the trick.

Eventually, he thought he heard Will's voice through the wood. He muttered something – probably addressing his canines and questioning their sudden outburst. Hannibal took the opportunity to knock once more. A few seconds passed, during which the dogs kept barking, and then, finally, Will opened the door. For a brief moment, Hannibal found himself in a state of awe.

Will looked like hell, but smelled gloriously of caramel and whiskey.

For the first three seconds that passed, Will just stared dumbly at Hannibal, wondering if he was hallucinating. Then, once he got over the shock and realized that Hannibal was actually standing there, he immediately pulled the door shut – or rather, he *tried* to pull the door shut. Hannibal had a firm grip on the outside handle and refused to budge. Damn alphas and their superior physique. He sent the alpha an irritated glare, still gripping at the door handle.

“Are you attempting a B and E? I can have you arrested, you know.”

“I need to talk to you,” Hannibal said, sounding infuriatingly calm, as if holding the door open was about as challenging for him as turning a page in a magazine.

“Well, I don’t need to talk to you,” Will retorted, but ultimately let go of the door, deeming his chances of winning the pulling contest abysmal. “I thought I made that pretty clear in my email.”

Hannibal gazed down at him with a mild frown. Will immediately hated how his eyes glowed like ambers in the morning sun.

“You did, and I’m not here to argue with your decision. I’m simply here to clear the air, so to speak. May I come in?”

Will let out a sigh. He suspected Hannibal wouldn't leave until he was allowed to say whatever it was he wanted to say to Will. Though he strongly disliked the idea of letting Hannibal into his house. He still has some sense of self-perseverance.

“Make it brief,” he quipped and motioned for Hannibal to come in. His kitchen was a mess, but so was his head and he couldn’t bring himself to care. He leaned his back against the kitchen counter and nodded Hannibal towards one of the empty chairs. The man took a seat, removed his leather gloves and placed them on the table. A few moments of tense silence went by. To Will, they felt like hours.

“Are you just going to sit there looking uncomfortable or are you going to apologize to me?” He snapped and crossed his arms over his chest. Hannibal had the gall to look at him like he was an intriguing puzzle he wanted to solve.

“You’re agitated.”

“Of course I’m agitated,” Will drawled, entirely unimpressed. Hannibal looked thoughtful.

“That’s good.”

“You realize that *you’re* the reason I’m agitated?”

“I do. And agitation is a perfectly appropriate response. I was worried you’d be blaming yourself.”

Will couldn’t help the furious disbelief bleeding into his expression.

“How fucking gallant of you. If you’re here to tell me that what you did to me last time was some *test* , just to see how I’d respond-”

“No.”

“Then what are you *doing here* ?!” The last words were practically shouted. “Stop psycho-analyzing me, just say what you came here to say!”

The silence that followed was heavy. They stared at each other. Pale blue, against rich brown. The intensity of the alpha’s eyes unsettled him. It was the way they searched his face, seemed to look beyond. Will looked away. Hannibal spoke.

“I’m sorry, Will. For what happened last time. I was out of line.”

Will swallowed. Kept his gaze averted.

“You were.”

“Yes. I made a series of errors that day that I’m not proud of. The predominant one being… well.” The alpha paused. “Making you uncomfortable.”

Will nodded slowly. There was a bird on the branch outside the window, happily tucking away at a fat caterpillar before promptly flapping away. Will desperately envied that bird, cliché that it was. He wanted to leave. Be somewhere else. Be someone else.

“You knew,” he eventually said, voice quiet. Hannibal waited a beat before he answered.

“I knew.”

“And you didn’t tell me.”

“You’ve gone to great lengths to hide your gender. I was trying to estimate the situation. Find the right time to broach the topic.”

An angry, wet scoff left Will. He turned to face Hannibal again, arms clenched tightly over his chest.

“‘ *Broach the topic* ’? Is that what you did?”

“Like I said,” Hannibal looked at him gravely. “I made an error. One that I deeply regret.”

“Have you told anyone?” Will said, not realizing until the very moment the words spilled

over his lips that he'd been petrified to broach *that* topic. Because if Hannibal had, it would mean he'd effectively torn down the fortress Will had spent so many years building; uprooting the very foundation of the life he'd created for himself. His heart rattled uneasily in his chest as he tried to read Hannibal's expression. The alpha seemed almost affronted.

"No." Hannibal said, and Will instantly knew he was telling the truth. He let out a quiet sigh as immense relief washed through him and settled in his knees. He grabbed the countertop with both hands and leaned back against it.

"Right. Because you'd be breaking confidentiality."

"There's that," Hannibal acknowledged with a nod. "Regardless, I've never been much of a town gossip. Your secrets are safe with me."

"How reassuring," Will mumbled, though the previously irritated edge to his voice was softening. "... Thank you."

For the next few moments, no one spoke. The wind rustled through the leaves outside, and sunshine glimmered through the dusty window, casting odd sunspots over the mess that was Will's kitchen. Winston, apparently unsettled by the sudden silence and shift in atmosphere, came in to check on his master. Will affectionately ran a hand through the dog's fur, gesturing for him to get back to the living room.

"So, the sandalwood cologne," Hannibal said, breaking the silence and Will felt tension immediately knot in his shoulders. "I'm assuming that's one of your methods?"

He should just ask the alpha to leave already. They'd said what they needed to say. Cut the ties. It was better that way. Instead, Will begrudgingly found himself opening his mouth to explain.

"Yeah. Beta scent enhancers - works wonders. I've used it to block my own scent for years."

"You're not wearing it now," Hannibal pointed out and Will was immediately self-conscious about the fact that no, he certainly wasn't.

"I'm not in the habit of using it when I'm at home, alone. The smell confuses the dogs."

"And suppressants?"

"Yep. Daily basis, very effective," Will said tersely, now bitterly regretting that he'd allowed for the conversation to keep going. They were quickly approaching a topic he wasn't at all willing to broach. "Are we done?"

Hannibal gave him an odd look, eyebrows coming together slightly in something that Will thought resembled concern.

"Daily basis?"

Will froze. Cursed inwardly at his careless divulgence. Desperately grappled for control over the situation, but he heard the nervous strain in his voice when he spoke again.

“It’s not been an issue.”

“For how long?” Hannibal stared him down, serious and grave and full of the kind of professional authority only someone in the medical field would exhibit, upon suspecting that a patient was doing something that wasn’t healthy. Will would have normally admired that, if he hadn’t been the one under scrutiny. But he *wasn’t* a patient. Not Hannibal’s, anyway.

“You don’t need to know that,” came his lame retort, and even to Will, he sounded like a very guilty child trying to hide a misdeed from a parent. Hannibal didn’t look impressed.

“Will, overdosing is risky, you’d be putting an enormous strain on your body,” he explained, paused, and then a look of dismayed realization glinted in his eyes. “But you already know that, don’t you? Fatigue, irritability… ‘Not been an issue’, you say?” Hannibal let out a soft, perplexed scoff. “You’ve been suffering the side-effects all this time.”

They glared at one another for a tense moment.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” Will said, feeling hot and uncomfortable and desperately wishing Hannibal would just *leave* already.

“I wish you would. Do you understand what this kind of misuse could lead to?” Hannibal argued, and there was a sharp edge to his voice now that Will found himself reacting to; all the frustration and anxiety he’d had to deal with over the last couple of days came roaring to the surface, and it certainly didn’t help that Hannibal, of all people - the very catalyst of his miserable state - had the audacity to berate him. What gave him the right to make Will feel stupid and small and naive for having turned to the *one* salvation that had been within reach, and clung to it for dear fucking life?

“I do understand!” Will snarled at him, taking an aggressive step forward. “You’re the one who doesn’t! You’re an alpha, no one ever questions whether you can do your goddamned job! I have to *constantly* prove myself! Even as a beta! So yeah,” he seethed, staring straight into Hannibal’s infuriatingly chilly eyes, “I’ve relied on my suppressants, and it’s been shitty, but I haven’t regretted it for a single moment, and *now* -”

He cut himself off abruptly and backed away from the alpha. Out of breath, with anger still crackling through his nerves, but unsure of where to direct it. He was, at the very least, certain that he didn’t want to finish that sentence.

“Now… *what* ?” Hannibal pressed, and Will inhaled shakily, turning away from him.

“Look, can you just leave? We’ve said enough.”

Winston returned to the kitchen, clearly distressed now. Will rarely ever raised his voice. Especially not at home. The dog gave him a concerned whine and Will tiredly crouched down to ruffle his head affectionately, hoping Hannibal would, in fact, leave. He didn’t. Instead, he

delivered the finishing blow.

“They stopped working.”

It was a statement rather than a question. Will felt his shoulders sag with utter defeat. He leaned down to press his forehead against Winston’s fur.

“Please, *leave* .”

The quiet, save for Winston’s soft whine and the wet sound his tongue made as it flicked across Will’s cheek, was deafening. Will was holding his breath for the scuff of shoes, the retreating steps he so desperately wanted to hear. What came instead, was the rustle of Hannibal’s coat as the older man crouched down next to him, placed one knee on Will’s floor and a warm hand on his shoulder.

“I can help you.” The sharp tone in Hannibal’s voice had been replaced by a solemn kind of gentleness that ached in Will’s chest. He wanted to shrug the hand off, but the touch was comforting and Will allowed himself to indulge. He turned his head slightly to look at Hannibal. Felt something tug at him at the sight. The alpha regarded him with a steady, no-nonsense expression that somehow sandpapered the cutting edges of his distress and turned them into something smoother, something more manageable.

Will gave an unsteady laugh and pulled himself together as he stood. Hannibal followed his example.

“You’re relentless,” he huffed. “Losing a client bothers you that much?”

“I told you before, I was hoping we could be friends.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Will gave the alpha a tired look, feeling chafed and exhausted. Hannibal regarded him calmly.

“For us to spend time together.”

Will stared wordlessly at him for almost a full minute, trying - and failing - to comprehend what Hannibal was suggesting. The alpha might as well have spoken to him in lithuanian.

“And what? Make friendship bracelets?” Will couldn’t hide his incredulity, scornful skepticism bleeding into his words. Hannibal was unbearably patient with him.

“If you’ve reached the point where your body no longer responds to your suppressants, it’ll likely take months for you to recuperate. That is, if you’ve actually stopped taking them after the fact. Have you?”

Will nodded begrudgingly. He had stopped taking them, in the hopes that he’d turn out to be some medical anomaly that miraculously bounced back in three days. He was not.

“Months, Will,” Hannibal repeated, putting emphasis on the first word. “Time that would,

perhaps, be better spent trying to approach the problem from a different angle. Or would you prefer simply waiting it out? And then, what?" Dismay crept into his eyes. "You'd resume the habit until this inevitably happens again? Because it will."

Will averted his gaze, his rationality treacherously siding with Hannibal, even as denial screamed in his ears.

"What exactly is the different angle?" He reluctantly asked.

"The radical notion of self-acceptance," Hannibal said. "That is, it might be wise for you to explore what and who you are. Perhaps even learn to embrace it."

"And where do you fit into the equation?" Will scowled suspiciously at Hannibal. The alpha gave him an unreadable smile.

"I've told you before that gender studies interest me. I'm confident I'd be able to help in that regard."

"Because you're an alpha?" Will said, anger surging back up, like bile in his throat. "And I'm just a dumb little omega who couldn't possibly figure this out on my own?"

Hannibal blinked calmly at him. Will felt childish again. But there was some bitter truth to the words that had left him, because wasn't that just *it* ? Wasn't this treatment - this condescension - exactly what he'd wanted to get away from?

"You seem to harbor considerable animosity towards my gender," the alpha eventually said, cocking his head slightly to the side in contemplation. "Anger. Fear. Different kinds of shackles. Is this really how you want to live?"

It took some time for Will to push away the pain those words caused him, because no - of course this wasn't what he wanted. He just couldn't see any other option. He'd make do, despite the unfortunate circumstances, because that was who he was. But, he unwillingly admitted to himself, these particular circumstances were much more unfortunate than whatever it was he'd gotten used to.

"Why are you doing this?" Will sighed, wrapping his arms around himself. "What do you get out of this?"

"I told you."

"You want to be friends," Will said slowly, unconvinced, raising his eyebrow. "I got that. Why *me* , though?"

Hannibal's expression turned unreadable again, before the alpha sent him a smile of gentlemanly admission.

"I've found you to be exceedingly fascinating."

Will stared at the alpha, feeling warmth creep into his cheeks at the unexpected compliment. Was it even a compliment? Were those the words of a therapist admitting his unyielding curiosity? Or was it just the way Hannibal smiled at him now, like Will was an intriguing novel, or a delightful secret whispered into his ear?

Will suddenly had the unwelcome urge to reach out to the man, get closer, so that the bergamot and green tea that had been nesting in Will's mind for the past few days would become more than fading memories.

Instead, he cleared his throat and took a step back, opting for distance. Distance was safe.

"I'll… consider it," he conceded.

"Please do." Hannibal did seem to be readying himself to leave now, and Will was relieved. The alpha took a step back, collected his leather gloves from where he'd left them on the kitchen table, and gave Will a parting look. "Let me know when you've made your decision."

Will nodded mutely and watched Hannibal exit through the front door. He stayed where he was, hugging himself, until he heard Hannibal's car drive away. At which point he slowly made his way to the door, locked it, and then sank to his knees.

He focused on breathing for a full minute. Focused on the way Hannibal's words had planted a small seed of untrustworthy hope in his chest. Tried *not* to focus on the way he was glad that Hannibal had shown up.

Cutting ties would have been better. Will knew it would have been better.

And yet.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

:)

Deal

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Major revision in progress. (March, 2024)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It occurred to Will that he'd been staring out his kitchen window for nearly twenty minutes without taking a sip of his tea, which he'd already re-heated in the microwave oven – twice. It wasn't that he was looking for anything in particular in the rapidly darkening scenery of his front yard. He just needed something to stare at while sorting out his thoughts.

Re-heating the cup of chamomile yet again just didn't seem worth the effort, so he brought the cup to his bottom lip and took a daring sip. The lukewarm temperature was a disappointment, but the flavor was calming.

A shrill whine came from his left and Will looked down to discover that Winston was sitting by his chair staring back at him, head cocked quizzically to the side.

"What's up, buddy?" Will mumbled and reached down to pet the dog. This would've normally sparked a playful reaction out of Winston, but instead the dog continued his whining and carefully licked Will's knuckles. He'd been on edge ever since Hannibal's visit, and Will's outburst. Perhaps there was more to it, too.

Will frowned. The entire pack had been acting differently around him for the last couple of days and he had a nagging suspicion that it was because his pheromones were now coming off of him in big, unadulterated, omega-shaped clouds. The fifteen years of suppressant misuse would have likely slowed down his pheromone production, but those glands seemed to have swiftly reawakened, full-force.

He had no idea what he smelled like. Had never really had the opportunity - or the urge - to ask anyone. Will wondered, briefly, if Hannibal had been able to pick up on it the other day.

"You're not wearing it now."

Will paused with his cup half-way to his lips. If Will's scent had indeed been strong enough at the time… what had Hannibal thought? The question was as surprising as it was unwelcome. It didn't *matter* what Hannibal thought.

Will sighed and downed the tea in a series of long gulps before he got up, left the cup on the already cluttered kitchen counter and headed for the bathroom, where he ended up in front of the mirror. He still maintained his signature look of absolute exhaustion, but there was a strange glow to his skin that hadn't been there before. A rosy hue of *health* glimmering ever

so slightly just beneath the pale skin.

Will gritted his teeth and opened up the cabinet to glare at the yellow jar of suppressants still sitting on the shelf. He'd been relying on those pills for so long. Depended on them to always be there for him - to save him from his unfortunate fate. Instead they'd given him a false sense of security before ripping the rug from under his feet and throwing him to the wolves – completely unprotected. Disloyal little shits.

What bothered him the absolute most, though, was how *well* he was starting to feel. He slept better. Ate more. Aches in his joints and in his muscles that had been there for so long that Will hadn't even paid attention to them anymore, had gradually eased up and allowed him to stand straighter, move around more nimbly. These were all good things, but it was as though his body was rubbing his mistakes in his face.

'You really fucked yourself over, kid', it said.

Biting back the string of curses resting on his tongue, Will turned to the toilet, pulled the lid up and took a piss, pretending that everything that had gone to hell lately was down there, in the water. His suppressants betraying him, Hannibal and his goddamned *alpha potency*, the very fact that he'd been born an omega, Jack refusing to listen to him…

The omega killings still weighed heavily on his mind. He scoured the news sites every day, hungry for details. But the BSU were tight-lipped and only offered basic information.

We've ruled out the possibility of a copycat…

Most likely an alpha…

No immediate suspects…

Superficial, unimportant, useless stuff. Will needed the gritty details in order to profile the killer – who was still a *beta*, thank you very much – preferably in the form of photographs, if he wasn't allowed to visit the scenes himself. The graphic, high resolution kind. But there were none. Even Freddie Lounds seemed to be having problems finding juicy material, though she still liked to write smart-ass commentary on the BSU apparent stagnation and theorizing on Will's absence. Still, when he was feeling particularly desperate, he would visit her tabloid site. Just in case.

The need to search the sites once more overcame him, even though it had only been a couple of hours since the last time he checked. He zipped up his jeans, washed his hands and headed for the living room, where he'd left his tablet on the couch.

He flopped down with a grunt, earning himself alarmed looks from the dogs resting at various spots throughout the room and he gave them a dismissive wave. After a minute or so, Will had already been let down by two of the major news sites and rapidly lost faith. Reluctantly, he went on TattleCrime, mouth twisting in disgust at himself as the site loaded. When the newest post came into view, however, Will stiffened with surprise.

A slightly unfocused photo of Hannibal took up half the screen. He appeared to be having a conversation with Jack, who stood to Hannibal's right, half-hidden behind a large bush.

The headline made Will sigh heavily.

FBI "counsellor" replaced? Renowned therapist to the rescue!

Readers, as you all know, I've been working hard to find out what happened to BSU former darling/nutcase extraordinaire – Will Graham (link) – without any notable success. Whatever happened to him, it's clear that the FBI do not want us to know. I made a startling discovery this afternoon, however – it appears as though Graham has been replaced by the man seen in the photos. Hannibal Lecter is a psychiatrist based in Baltimore, renowned for his success rate in treating neuroticism and PTSD. What he isn't *renowned for is assisting in crime investigations. And yet, there he is, smack down in the middle of the latest crime scene. You might recall the photos posted on October 15th (link), where Lecter can be seen accompanying Graham at the initial scene of the omega killings. Were they scouting him? Or did Lecter find Graham so appallingly unstable that he felt it'd be best to step in and fill his shoes? How come the BSU condones working with non-agents in the hopes of solving this case? Will it prove effective? Only time will tell.*
And where on earth is Graham?
Stay tuned!
- F.L.

Will didn't let Freddie's scornful words get to him, having already expected the article to not paint a pretty picture of him, nor the BSU. But seeing Hannibal on the scene, conversing with Jack, made something uncomfortable churn in his stomach.

Envy. He was so damned envious.

He hated being dismissed from an on-going investigation, but being replaced like this – by a man he trusted to be on his side – was even worse. Hannibal was given direct access to the details Will longed for so badly. Hannibal was allowed to enter the scenes, see the bodies, and sense the atmosphere. All Will had clearance to was his stupid iPad.

He chucked the useless device to the other side of the couch with an irritated sigh and pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyelids. Wheels turned frantically in his head. Unwillingly, he thought back to what Hannibal had suggested.

"That we spend time together"

Hannibal had seemed pretty adamant about it. Granted, the man was a therapist. Perhaps he was the kind who just couldn't leave a patient alone until he'd cured him – if that was in fact what Hannibal intended to do. A whisper of distrust swirled by. Hannibal was an alpha. Alphas were violent beings. They took what they wanted, drawing blood if necessary. And he'd already crossed a line with Will on multiple occasions.

"I made an error. One that I deeply regret."

Will scoffed, but there was no real heat in it. Hannibal had seemed genuinely regretful. That didn't mean Will's trust was restored. It'd take more than that.

He gave his iPad a thoughtful look. TattleCrime was still glowing on the screen.

And then, Will made a decision.

He went to his email account and composed a message to Hannibal, which he quickly sent before his nerves got the better of him.

No turning back now.

Hannibal couldn't help the amused smirk that curved his lips. Either Will was coming around to his way of thinking, or he was up to something entirely different. Regardless, Hannibal was glad to receive the email, in all its inelegant glory.

From: Will Graham
Subject: About your proposition

I thought about it. You win. Make me dinner and we'll talk more. Ok?

-W

Chuckling softly to himself, Hannibal put together a response. It took longer than normal, since he had to type it all out using only the thumb of his left hand.

To: Will Graham
Subject: RE: About your proposition

I'm pleased to hear that. Shall we say tomorrow, at six o'clock?

- Hannibal Lecter

It didn't take many minutes before Will's affirmative reply came. Hannibal smiled, feeling gratified and triumphant. He slipped his smartphone back into his pocket and released the grip he had on the man's throat, as the pig was already unconscious from the prolonged asphyxiation.

Hannibal stood up to regard the useless lump of a body for a few seconds. He then crouched down to his bag to collect one of his tools. A surge of energy and exhilaration made Hannibal's lips twitch as he raised his butcher's knife, planting it neatly just above the man's shoulders. The metal cut through the man's neck and separated the head from the body in one smooth slice.

He waited a few minutes for the blood to leave the body before he chopped off the parts he wanted for himself, stuffing them into a large plastic container he'd brought along.

"No need to worry. You will be far more useful now than you ever were as a living creature," Hannibal said idly, glancing at the man's cut off head and its half-hooded, glazed over eyes. "Tomorrow night, you'll be the main course, and I have a very special guest coming. Consider it an honour."

Will found himself staring at Hannibal's front door at three minutes past six, suddenly uncertain if his punctuality would send a message of eagerness. He'd even gone the extra mile by brushing his hair and wearing one of his less cheap suits. And, remembering that Hannibal had told him the 'cheap beta cologne' didn't suit him, he'd chosen not to wear it for this special occasion. Will could be accommodating when he wanted to be.

In hindsight, he regretted all of this. He didn't want Hannibal to think he was *too* keen with the arrangement they were about to commence. But on the other hand, he needed Hannibal to believe that he was willing to give this an actual try.

Sucking in a breath, Will raised his hand and rapped his knuckles against the wood, belatedly realizing that there was a metal door knocker right in the center of the door that he could've used. His knuckles throbbed and he resisted the urge to roll his eyes at himself for the blunder, but stiffened when he heard steps approaching from inside. Something nervous and - god help him - *excited* seized his heart and made it actually flutter for a second.

When the door swung open, it forced Will to quickly back up a step to avoid getting hit – yet another clumsy mistake – and he stumbled slightly before looking up, cheeks heating up from embarrassment. Hannibal smiled gently at him, dressed in a white button-up with the sleeves rolled up and a black apron covering most of his legs. All in all, Hannibal looked much more casual than he normally did. Will suddenly felt overdressed. He sighed inwardly and forced himself to return the smile.

"Please," Hannibal said and gestured for Will to come inside. He stepped inside the hallway and was immediately greeted by the aroma of food. Will felt his mouth begin to water as he shrugged his jacket off and hung it up. "Dinner will be served in just a few more minutes."

"Right, because I'm here to *eat* ," Will commented dryly, earning himself an odd look from Hannibal.

"You asked me to cook."

At that moment, Will's stomach gave an insistent growl, signaling Will's growing appetite. The two men stared at each other for a second before Will cleared his throat.

"Yeah. Sorry." He sent Hannibal an apologetic look. "My mind's been elsewhere. But it really does smell good."

Hannibal smiled, appearing somewhat appeased, as he led Will into the dining room. Will was in a reluctant state of awe at Hannibal's home. Not that he'd expected the therapist to be living in a rugged cabin out in the woods like he did, but he hadn't quite expected the sheer luxury that made up every inch of Hannibal Lecter's villa either. The dining table was so smooth Will could've used it as a mirror.

If Will didn't already feel awkward and out-of-place, he sure as hell did now.

"Take a seat," Hannibal said and pulled out one of the chairs for Will, on the far end of the table. If the table setting was anything to go by, Hannibal would be taking a seat at the other end. This made Will relax a little. They would be able to maintain eye contact and hold a conversation without being needlessly close to one another. He felt this was an advantage. With his hormones running amok, Hannibal wasn't the only person in the room that Will did not trust.

Hannibal disappeared into the kitchen and Will was left alone in the somewhat intimidating dining room. While it was impressive in its sleek glory and size, Will normally preferred a simpler interior. Worn-out furniture. Dogs yapping for scraps. China inherited from one's grandparents. But he supposed he saw the appeal.

Hannibal reappeared shortly after, with two steaming plates in his hands. He placed one of them in front of Will first, then walked over to the other side of the table, where he put the plate down before taking a seat.

Will hungrily eyed his portion. A large, juicy piece of red meat rested on one side of the plate, marinating in olive oil and plenty of spices. The other half of the plate was occupied by a fluffy pile of mashed potatoes, decorated by the unmistakable yellow of a buttery béarnaise sauce. The ensemble smelled heavenly and Will had to swallow to ensure he wouldn't start drooling all over himself.

"This looks fantastic," he declared, genuinely grateful for the effort Hannibal had made.

"Let's hope it tastes fantastic, too," Hannibal replied, giving Will a brief, good-natured grin.

They ate most of their meal in silence, interrupted only by the soft classical music playing in the background and the clinking of their forks against the plates. Hannibal poured Will a glass of alcohol free chianti – since he was driving – and Will found it went well with the meat, which was similar in taste to the sausage Hannibal had prepared for him several weeks earlier.

"What meat is this?"

"Pork."

"I thought it might be."

The silence dragged out, but it wasn't necessarily unpleasant. Will just felt a bit awkward.

Once the plates were empty, Hannibal got up to refill Will's glass and Will struggled to pretend he was fine with being pampered. He was not accustomed - nor typically willing - to having people serve things up for him. But Hannibal appeared to be happy to do it, so he left it alone.

"So," Hannibal said as he sat back down in his chair, having just refilled his own glass. "Shall we discuss?

Will's nerves jittered to life and he reached for his glass, taking a long sip and bitterly mourning that it was not alcoholic, before nodding.

"Let's."

Seconds dragged out. Neither of them spoke. Will found this new silence unbearable. Hannibal looked at him like he was a riddle he was trying to solve. Being so intensely observed made Will nervous.

"So I'm thinking," he finally blurted, failing to appear as calm and collected as he would've liked, "that we might consider this as more of a… business proposal."

"A business proposal?" Hannibal repeated, lips stretching into a smile that looked vaguely amused.

"That's right. An exchange of services."

"And this would be more agreeable to you than simple friendship?" Hannibal sounded genuinely perplexed by this, and Will gave a stiff shrug.

"I'm not a very friendly guy." This was true. Aside from perhaps Alana Bloom, there were very few people Will considered himself to be on friendly terms with. He genuinely didn't know how to go about it.

"I see," Hannibal said and to Will's relief, he didn't seem offended. "Am I correct to assume you want something from me, then? Other than what we talked about the other day?"

"Information," Will confirmed. "I want you to tell me everything you find out about the omega killings. Jack has completely cut me off, and it's…" He trailed off with a sigh. "It's driving me insane."

"You seemed so concerned about confidentiality the other day," Hannibal drawled, swirling the wine around in his glass. Will glared at him.

"You won't tell anyone about my gender," he asserted, sounding bolder than he felt. Hannibal raised an eyebrow at him. "Because if you do, I'll let the BSU know what you did to me that day in your office. You may not lose your license over it, but… You seem like the kind of man who would hate to have his reputation tarnished."

"Touché," Hannibal said, eyes more intense now. "So we're in a stalemate there."

“Precisely.”

“And the deal you’re suggesting is..?”

“That you provide information regarding the case, and I’ll… spend time with you.”

“In order to help you, I might add,” Hannibal pointed out, cocking his head to the side. Intrigue glinted in his eyes as they met Will’s. “And seeing as you are unwilling to meet my request for friendship, you seem to be the only one benefitting from this business proposal.”

“I’m not, though,” Will said, ignoring the way his pulse hammered almost painfully in his throat, hoping to god that his voice would come out steady as he repeated the words Hannibal had told him in his kitchen a few days ago. “I’m… ‘exceedingly fascinating’.”

Will had thought it over, again and again, until he’d reached the conclusion that Hannibal’s keen interest in him exceeded whatever one might expect from someone looking for friendship. Even Will, despite his limited understanding of social connection, could see that. He thought it far more likely that Hannibal’s studious curiosity was the driving force behind his insistence. But this was still a wild horse to bet on.

Hannibal’s expression brightened with something Will couldn’t quite place. Amusement? Triumph?

“That, you are,” Hannibal agreed, letting out a low, smooth chuckle that sent a mild shiver across Will’s skin. He’d thought he might have the upper hand this time. So why did he suddenly feel like a bug caught in a spider’s web? “I do believe we have a deal, Mr Graham. If we are to treat this as a business proposal, perhaps we should discuss terms and conditions.”

“I agree,” said Will, sitting up straighter. “I want weekly reports. And access to photographs.”

“Fine. Then I would like to add a clause stating that you accompany me to various activities of my choosing.”

“What… *sort* of activities?” Will hated the nervous tremor in his voice, but gritted his teeth against it. Hannibal sent him a mildly affronted look.

“Will, I realize that I crossed a line with you that day, but I’m not some heedless fiend.”

“Alright,” Will grumbled, leaning his elbows on the smooth tabletop and clasping his hands in front of his mouth. “Still, I’d like a head’s up. What sort of activities did you have in mind?”

“Nothing specific at the moment,” Hannibal said, relaxing back into his own chair. “But to give you some idea, I’d like for us to regularly have conversations, share meals, and for us to occasionally accompany each other to various gatherings, with the explicit purpose of getting you accustomed to my scent and proximity.”

“Hang on,” Will said, tensing up at the shoulders. “Get me used to your scent? Does that constitute 'spending time together'? Because what you’re suggesting now sounds more like… a *courtship* .”

The word left him like a curse; like a phenomenon one might find only in horror stories. Hannibal paused and sent Will another one of his infuriatingly calm smiles. As if they’d somehow, despite this whole business proposal thing having been Will’s idea, ended up precisely where he’d wanted them to.

“I suppose it does,” he agreed, idly taking a sip from his wine glass. “It’d be a faux courtship, of course, but nonetheless.”

“What on *earth* makes you think that’s a good idea?” Will breathed, fully horrified now. Things were getting out of hand.

“Exposure therapy,” Hannibal said, still smiling, as if what he was proposing wasn’t ludicrous, bordering on indecent. “And since *friendship* is off the table…”

“You came to the rational conclusion that I’d be more comfortable with a courtship?” Will huffed incredulously, making no efforts to be polite. “With *you* ? What a way to sweeten the deal.”

Hannibal locked gazes with Will then, eyes intense and unrelenting and Will found himself utterly unable to look away.

“What was it that triggered your unresponsiveness to suppressants, Will?”

Will felt as though he’d hit, open-palm, across his face at that. He blinked against the shock, suddenly extremely keen to get out. Forget the deal. Forget the intel he’d hoped to get his hands on. Forget Hannibal. But his legs didn’t seem to obey him. He only managed a sharp inhale of breath, and the present came rushing back.

This was the part where he could have denied what Hannibal was suggesting. He could have made a fairly convincing case based on the fact that he’d been overdosing for fifteen years, and that the camel’s back was bound to break at *some* point, but he could already feel the heat pooling in his cheeks and down his neck.

“Gloating doesn’t suit you,” Will said, voice coming out quiet and raw. He felt as though he might as well be sitting there stark naked.

“Not at all. I’m flattered,” Hannibal said, with a gentler look in his eyes. Will couldn’t stand that look, so he averted his gaze.

“It’s not as if I chose this.”

“Attraction rarely is a choice. It just happens to most of us, at one time or another,” Hannibal said, sounding every bit the therapist Will didn’t want him to be. “It’s nothing to be ashamed

of."

"That's easy for you to say," Will muttered, dragging a hand over his furiously glowing face, as if he could wipe away the evidence of his embarrassed discomfort. "You're not the one having to deal with it. And as far as our business proposal goes, this puts you in a rather superior position, doesn't it?"

"I wouldn't say that," Hannibal said then, voice oddly tender. Will looked over at him, stunned to find the alpha looking at him with something akin to hunger in his eyes. Will's breath caught in his throat, letting the implication sink in. It settled in his stomach; like he'd swallowed a glowing piece of coal.

Entirely unwilling to further explore what that sensation meant, Will cleared his throat and settled his features in a grave expression.

"It'd be a *faux* courtship, correct?"

"Insofar as the two of us have ulterior motives, yes." Hannibal was back to smiling gentlemanly at him. "I still expect you to act accordingly."

"And you… really think it might help?" Will allowed himself to ask, because he was still struggling to wrap his head around Hannibal's stated intentions.

"I think you've held onto unhealthy assumptions about your gender, and about mine, for far too long. I don't claim to know what your past experiences have been, but denying your true nature - and rejecting certain aspects of life - is something I would very much like to help you move past. And yes." Hannibal leaned his own elbows on the tabletop to fold his hands together, providing Will with an excellent view of his strong forearms, upon which Will's gaze lingered entirely without his permission. "I think spending time with me, and letting me court you - even under pretense - might be very effective in that regard."

"Okay," Will conceded, voice shaky, but tone certain. "Fine. I agree to your terms."

"Shall we seal the deal, so to speak?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, we're both here. We've got plenty of time. We might as well commence this… 'exchange of services', as you'd call it."

Will perked up. He was fairly sure Hannibal wasn't suggesting anything untoward - not after having made it clear that he was not, in fact, some heedless fiend. And he did desperately want answers.

"Tell me what you've learned so far. I know you've visited the new scene at least once. Jack should've given you access to lab reports by now." He gritted his teeth and waited for Hannibal's response. The alpha looked thoughtful for a second, before nodding.

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything terribly substantial to tell you yet, but we now know that the murderer is in the habit of applying sodium hydroxide to the bites.”

Will stared at him, taking in the piece of information like a starved man gobbling up a piece of bread.

“Caustic soda?” He breathed, eyebrows knitting together as he connected the dots in his mind. At the same time, an extremely uncomfortable ghost sensation prickled at the back of his neck and he reached up to rub at the imaginary wound.

The weird, burnt odour he’d smelled in the air. A reaction of the acid making contact with the victims’ blood, perhaps. The bite marks had been unusually violent, there was no tender finesse at all - though he supposed there wouldn’t be.

He never raped the omegas, but a bite always comes with saliva. Erase his DNA to ensure he won’t be caught? The guy’s possibly already in the registry. Or… the perpetrator doesn’t want anyone to know that he’s actually a beta. He wants us to keep looking for an alpha, because that’s how he sees himself. But on some level he realizes that the DNA in his saliva would tell a different story and he can’t stand the idea of-

“Will.”

Will snapped his head up, dizzy from the steady stream of theories and ideas forming inside his skull. Hannibal regarded him with an expectant smile.

“Was that piece of intel to your satisfaction?”

“Yes,” Will admitted with a nod. “It’s definitely helpful. Thank you.”

“Then,” Hannibal rose slowly from his chair, causing every muscle in Will's body to cramp up in nervousness. “May I be so bold as to ask you to hold up your end of the bargain?”

“I-... Yes. Sure.” Will remained seated, but he felt his hands cramp closely together, like he was expecting a death blow. “What do you want?”

Hannibal didn’t walk up to him. Instead, he stayed next to his chair, one hand casually tucked in his pocket, and the other one raised towards Will.

“Come here.”

Pressing his lips together, Will stood and made his way over on legs that weren’t steady, but thankfully not so wobbly that he fell over. He gave Hannibal’s hand a skeptical look, as if Hannibal was holding out a snake for him to look at, before hesitantly placing his hand in the alpha’s. Hannibal’s fingers were warm as they closed around his and pulled him a little closer. Then the alpha leaned down a fraction, positioning himself so that his jaw lined up against Will’s - but not touching. Will swallowed tightly and breathed in. The scent of bergamot and green tea was intense now and, as much as he hated it, he felt parts of himself respond to that scent. Longing welled up in him, and Will found himself unsure of what to do

with it. And why was Hannibal just *standing* there? Then it dawned on him.

Hannibal wanted Will to close the distance. He wanted *Will* to scent *him* .

“I still expect you to act accordingly.”

Was this 'acting accordingly'? Scenting was such an intimate act; one that Will knew did, of course, regularly occur in real courtships. But in faux ones?

Then again, Will reminded himself, Hannibal had mentioned the scent and proximity aspect, and Will had in fact agreed to that. It wouldn't be the first time anyway, he bitterly reminded himself. Not to mention, Hannibal had broken confidentiality for him just now. He couldn't back out. He'd never forgive himself for that.

Steeling himself, Will closed his eyes and leaned in, letting his jaw brush against Hannibal’s in a soft greeting, and the reaction was instantaneous. Will felt as though something grabbed a hold of his very core and yanked him forward, because he ended up doing it again. Firmer this time. Felt the very mild stubble of Hannibal’s clean shaven cheek drag against his own skin, leaving tracks of electricity in its wake. With a shuddering inhale, he took a step back, looking up at the alpha. Hannibal regarded him with the same calm expression he’d donned throughout most of their evening together, but Will saw the darkening of his eyes, the expanding pupils, and desperately wished he hadn’t noticed.

“Was…” He was horrified to hear the huskiness in his own voice, and immediately turned his face away, fully aware that his cheeks were burning once more. “Was that to your satisfaction?”

Hannibal’s voice was just a bit rough around the edges when he spoke. It sent a shiver down Will’s spine.

“It was. Well done.”

Will didn’t know how to respond to the praise in Hannibal’s voice, so he took a few awkward steps back, fingers gliding across the surface of the table.

“Then I should…” He trailed off and cleared his throat. “Thank you for dinner, Hannibal.”

“My pleasure, Will.”

Hannibal followed him to the front door and, gentleman that he was, retrieved Will’s coat from its hanger and handed it over. Will still couldn’t quite bring himself to look at Hannibal. He would’ve expected what happened just now to be unpleasant and frightening, but he found that it wasn’t - it was just very, very confusing.

“We’ll be in touch, then?” Will said, one hand on the doorknob and finally braved a glance to Hannibal.

“We will,” the alpha agreed, smiling gently. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Will left. It wasn’t until he was half-way to Wolf Trap that reality truly dawned on him.

A courtship. A fucking courtship.

A faux one, but still. He’d agreed to be courted. Unbelievable. Reckless.

Will told himself that it was for a good cause. He told himself it was a means to an end - which it *was* - and he told himself it’d end soon. He’d go along with this, until he was well enough to go back on the suppressants; back to his normal life.

He told himself he didn’t enjoy the scent of bergamot still lingering on his jawline.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Truths

Chapter Notes

NOTE: major revision in progress, march 2024

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal regarded the scene in front of him with a growing sense of disdain. His general distaste for sloppiness made it difficult for him to look past the haphazard positions of the two bodies, the way they clearly *hadn't* been handled with artistic care, hair messy and clothes torn off, the graffiti on the wall that looked like it had been written by a middle schooler. Bright yellow this time. It made an ugly contrast against the dirty beige cement pillar.

The scene reminded him of the chaos one might find in a young child's play room. He struggled to keep his criticism to himself and instead settled his features in a mask of mild concern and contemplation.

"What are we thinking, Dr Lecter?" Jack placed himself next to him, shoulders drawn up in a futile attempt to stay warm. The air around them was foggy and winterly and, because the bodies had been found below a grand overpass, they were shielded from the sun.

"I'd say it's the same perpetrator," Hannibal replied. "A copycat – at least one looking for recognition by the original killer – would've tried harder to imitate the first murders, but this... is just a haphazard mess."

"Agreed," Jack sighed. "Same guy. Victims nine and ten. He's already reached double digits. Unbelievable."

"He'd already killed five of them when we first learned of his existence. Say what you will, the perpetrator is an efficient one."

"Still, he only got two this time around. Is he getting tired? Suffering from remorse? Or is this all part of some pattern we're not seeing? Does he have a thing for numbers?" Jack peppered Hannibal with questions that he didn't have immediate answers to and, not for the first time, he was filled with a sense of growing admiration for Will - who was probably accustomed to Jack's guessing games, and would have been able to answer all of these questions in the blink of an eye.

"I don't think it's likely, but I can't rule out the possibility of any of that," Hannibal said and then, with a smile that was as polite as it was cold, he added, "sadly, unlike Graham, I don't possess the talent of entering the mindset of dangerous criminals. I'll be needing some time to consider what the killer's motivations are, and why the number of victims is decreasing."

Jack gave him an openly irritated look.

“I know you aren’t happy with this arrangement, but you did agree to do the job.”

Hannibal said nothing. Jack waited a few seconds before he spoke up once more.

“Speaking of Will,” he said and gave Hannibal a curious look, “I hear you’re no longer his therapist. What happened there?”

“He asked to terminate his sessions,” Hannibal said, effortlessly bending the truth, and returned Jack’s curious look with a raised eyebrow. “And I think it’s likely because he found out I’ve temporarily stepped in. Photos are already circulating online. I imagine that would’ve put a dent in his trust towards me.”

“... Damnit,” Jack muttered.

“A rather natural response, don’t you think?” Hannibal said. “Especially considering how immensely dedicated he is-”

“There you go again,” Jack sighed. “Enough already. I never said Will isn’t dedicated. Frankly, I’m getting pretty tired of you suggesting that I don’t care about my agents.“

“Perhaps you’re reading into my words because you’re feeling guiltier about this than you let yourself believe,” Hannibal retorted, tone idle. “Given how quick you are to defend yourself, one would assume you see criticism even where there is none.”

“Your job is to profile the perp – not me.”

Hannibal sent him a chilly look. Jack glared back, hands shoved deep into his pockets, before turning from Hannibal and walking away with short, angry strides. It baffled Hannibal how such a simple man could be so difficult to handle. He turned his gaze back to the crime scene just in time for one of the techs to wave him over.

The woman was dressed in a white plastic overall and removed her blue gloves as he approached her. She sniffled in the cold and gestured to the scene.

“Alright, Dr Lecter, we’re finished marking the place down. The bodies will be removed from the scene in less than twenty minutes, so you’ll have to work fast,” she explained, tone curt and to the point. “There’s an open manhole over there where that red flag is – stay clear of that, yeah? One of my assistants nearly fell in. Could’ve done some serious damage.”

“Has the manhole in question been searched?”

“Not yet. A new team will be arriving once the bodies have been taken to the autopsy lab. They’ll scour the area more thoroughly.” She then proceeded to hold up a zip lock bag, containing a brown leather wallet. “We found this, though.”

Hannibal took the plastic bag and scanned the object. The leather on the outside was shiny and looked relatively new. The zipper was rose gold. A woman's item, no doubt.

"Have you looked inside?"

"Yep. License says it belonged to one Sarah McMillan. Now, we can't say for sure yet whether one of these poor girls is her, but we believe this wallet belonged to victim number nine over there," she said and pointed towards a mangled female body laying face down on the grass. "Would you care to take a peek inside the wallet? I'll get you a pair of gloves."

"I think Crawford is better suited for that. I'm not here to find out who the victims were," he explained with a polite smile, handed the bag over to the crime scene tech and gave her a brief nod to excuse himself. She returned the smile and headed off in Jack's direction.

Hannibal walked into the scene with an odd sort of excitement. It felt like he was entering someone else's house without permission. Someone else's playground. Keeping his hands neatly tucked behind his back as he slowly approached the body closest to him, Hannibal inclined his head to study the half-naked body below.

Victim number ten was a curvy blonde, dressed the way he imagined call girls normally dressed on the job. Or, well, she *had* been dressed that way, before the perpetrator struck. The red miniskirt was now hitched up, revealing her badly bruised buttocks. The once white blouse was torn and dyed with blood and mud. Hannibal didn't care to scrutinize the state of her body more than necessary – that was the medical examiner's job – and instead turned his attention to the message on the wall.

Punishment
- A

Hannibal gave an unimpressed smirk.

You child.

Hannibal walked over to nine – the one presumed to be Sarah McMillan – and regarded her coldly through hooded eyes. He didn't need to crouch down to see that she had been strangled. The stockings were still wrapped tightly around her neck. The bite mark, sitting just below the offending material, was morbidly fresh-looking. The caustic soda wouldn't let the blood coagulate properly. Not that it mattered to her anymore.

It didn't evade Hannibal that presumably-Sarah was dressed in a decidedly different fashion than number ten. The dark blue pencil skirt and matching blazer, the classy watch on her wrist and the flat pumps she wore led Hannibal to theorise that presumably-Sarah must've had a different profession.

He glanced back to number ten. Regarded the high stilettos hanging off her limp feet. The knock-off jewelleries on her wrists. The glittery black manicure decorating her fingertips. Glanced back to presumably-Sarah.

How on earth could two omegas coming from such wildly different backgrounds end up there, at the same place, executed by the same madman? How does the killer choose his victims? Where does he find them?

Jack suddenly appeared by his side once more, anger subsided. He regarded number ten's battered body with a mournful expression.

"Poor girl," he sighed, shaking his head slightly. "Life probably wasn't easy for this one."

"Liberty in death," Hannibal provided, keeping his voice appropriately low and solemn.

"Small mercies." Jack gave him a terse look. "Though I don't think *salvation* was the killer's intention."

"Agreed. There's nothing but cruelty and fury here." Hannibal gestured towards presumably-Sarah. "This one appears to have led a somewhat different lifestyle, though."

"Sarah McMillan works as an administrator at Baltimore state hospital. We found her ID card in the purse. We'll need someone from her family to confirm her identity, of course, but judging from the photo on her driver's license…" Jack cleared his throat and averted his gaze, as if he couldn't bear to look at the body for another second. "I'd say that's her. Same hair."

"I suppose we should be thankful that the killer's motive isn't robbery. This is the first time we've found a wallet, no?"

"It is," Jack confirmed. "We believe the killer is discarding items that may serve to identify the victims. Perhaps he thinks it'll slow us down," he released a dry scoff. "He got sloppy this time. Morning traffic probably stressed him out."

"We're searching for a rather naïve man, then. Someone who hasn't committed any serious crimes before – someone with scarce knowledge of FBI procedure."

"I leave the profiling to you, Dr Lecter."

"Fine. Have you been able to confirm the identities of any of the past victims?"

"Nearly all of them have been ID'd by now," Jack said. "I'll email you a list with their personal information. We haven't been able to establish a clear pattern yet – all the victims seem to derive from dissimilar paths in life – but maybe you'll pick up on something we've missed. The only thing they have in common, that we know for certain, is that they're all omegas."

"Female omegas."

"Yeah – so far." Jack gave a shrug. "Male omegas are rare, so we can't say for certain that his preferences lean only towards females. It could be that they're just easier to find."

Hannibal gave a slow nod, sending the body at his feet a final glance before he turned and started walking back to his car.

“I’ll be waiting for that ID list, Crawford,” he called over his shoulder.

“And I’ll be waiting for your input, once you’ve actually got some!” Jack quipped back.

Hannibal couldn’t help but to smile at that.

Will stepped into Hannibal’s office with tense, rushed steps, throwing paranoid glances over his shoulder every few seconds. Driving into Baltimore hadn’t been an issue, but it was the first time he was out in the open without suppressants, smelling like, well, *himself* . He’d been nauseated by nervousness all morning, and - just as a precaution - he’d decided last minute to bring a life line with him. It was safely tucked into his briefcase – and it was one that he hoped he wouldn’t have to use. Hannibal wouldn't approve.

Said alpha looked up from his desk and gave him an amused smile.

“Will. You look like you’re running away from someone.”

“Oh, shut up,” Will snapped irritably as he sat down in one of the comfortable armchairs, twisting his neck in order to send Hannibal an accusing look. “You know how uncomfortable this is for me. Why couldn’t we just have met up at your place?”

“Because,” Hannibal stood and walked over to the chair across from the one Will was occupying, “you need to exceed your limits – step out of your comfort zone. You didn’t forget, did you?” He gave Will a pointed look before he sat down, crossing one leg over the other. Will rolled his eyes at him.

“Fine,” he sat up straighter and rolled his shoulders to get rid of some of the tensions there, “so what do you got for me? I’m not here for an ambush therapy session, am I?”

“No,” Hannibal gave him a smug grin and pulled out an envelope from his inner pocket. “I have something I think you’ll appreciate.”

“What is it?” Will asked, eyeing the envelope suspiciously.

“A list.”

“A list of *what* ?” Will demanded with an irritated scowl. Hannibal’s grin widened slightly, apparently amused by Will’s impatience. It made Will feel edgy – like he was playing right into the psychiatrist’s hands.

“The first eight victims have been identified. This,” Hannibal said and held the envelope up,

“is their personal information. Names, birthdates, what they did for a living… who they were. Do you want to read it?”

“Obviously.” Will narrowed his eyes and leaned back into his seat, struggling to hide how eager he was to read the contents of the envelope. “But I’m getting the feeling you want something big in return. You have that look in your eyes.”

“‘That look’?”

“Yeah,” Will said, lifting an eyebrow at the alpha. “The one that says I’m about to sell my soul to the devil. You know, you’re a lot less subtle about that, now that you’re no longer my therapist.”

Hannibal produced a wolfish, self-content smile that in no way helped Will feel more at ease.

“I’m not asking for your soul. I would like for you to accompany me to a vernissage in Chicago this upcoming weekend. I’ll cover all expenses.”

“... A vernissage?”

“Yes. Also known as a private exhibition of-“

“I know what it is,” Will drawled irritably. “It just didn’t occur to me that you’d have friends in the art community.”

“I do have an appreciation for the finer arts, but no - I’m friends with the man who owns the hotel where the vernissage will be taking place.”

“Ah. And I’m guessing we’ll be staying at that hotel?”

“Correct.”

“Christ, you move fast,” Will said, tone dry. “I mean, we went from scent marking, to a weekend trip. What’s next – moving in together?”

“Do we have a deal?” Hannibal pushed, ignoring Will’s sarcastic quips.

Will paused to consider the options. Hypothetically, he could just wait for the media to report on who the victims were - but it could take a while and they might withhold vital bits of information. Information that Will desperately wanted to obtain.

But the mere idea of spending the night in a hotel with Hannibal made his stomach churn with anxiety. The way he’d responded to Hannibal’s scent a few days ago weighed heavily on his mind. He was still getting used to his non-suppressed omega body and didn’t fully trust it to behave. Being in the same room as Hannibal was nerve wracking enough – *sleeping* in the same room was almost unthinkable.

“You’re not suggesting we actually share a bed, do you?” Will questioned, working hard to

keep his tone steady. “Because if so, I think we need to revisit the definition of ‘faux’.”

“I was thinking we’d get a suite,” Hannibal clarified, with a smile that was much more patient now. “There would be adjoining bedrooms.”

Will nodded, relieved.

“I suppose that works… If it's just over the weekend.”

“That being said,” Hannibal’s face took on a more serious look, “aside from spending the night apart, I would ask that you don’t leave my side without first letting me know where you’re going. For your own sake as well as mine.”

Will felt the cold hand of dread curl around his heart. The temperature in the room seemed to drop as the reality of the situation – the reality of what Hannibal was saying – reared its’ ugly head and extinguished the budding excitement in Will’s chest. He took a deep breath and attempted a smile, lips quivering ever so slightly from withheld emotions.

“Right. No leaving your side. Because if I do, then…” He paused to grit his teeth for a second. “I’ll be *vulnerable* .”

“Will…“

“You know, you made such a compelling case about the ‘shackles’ of fear and anger the other day, as if I’m just some biased, irrational redneck with a minority complex,” Will looked away with a bitter scoff, “but you… you *know* that without those shackles, I’ll need a goddamned chaperone instead. You think that’s freedom?”

“No,” Hannibal argued, effectively pissing Will off further. “That is not what I’m saying.”

“What *are* you saying?” Will turned back to Hannibal and cocked his head to the side in a challenging gesture of mock curiosity. “I mean, from where I’m sitting, it’s pretty clear. You’re saying that I, as an unmarked omega, will need your constant supervision to maintain some semblance of basic security. Because, you know, that’s the thing, Hannibal. That’s what’s kept me on suppressants all this time.” He glared openly at the alpha now. “I don’t *want* to be constantly supervised.”

“No,” Hannibal said slowly, face darkened by irritation. “You prefer hiding.”

“Over being babysat?” Will snapped, raising his eyebrows in agitation. “Can you blame me?”

“I wouldn’t be-” Hannibal cut himself off to take a breath and held up a hand. “Will, I’m not planning to… ‘babysit’ you,” he drawled, giving Will a tired look. “But because you’re accompanying me, I’d feel more comfortable knowing where you are while we’re there. Especially under these circumstances.”

“Which are?” Will figured what they were, but he was in a stubborn state of affront that didn’t want to be appeased just yet. Hannibal’s eyebrows knitted together.

“You’re just starting to learn.”

“Meaning?”

Hannibal sighed and stood, taking a few thoughtful steps towards the windows before he answered.

“You don’t know how to protect yourself yet,” he finally said, and Will felt himself bristle, angry tingles spreading across his scalp, but before he could think of something truly vindictive to say in return, Hannibal continued. “Omegas are astounding creatures. Misunderstood by many, sadly underestimated by some. There are some truly powerful tools at your disposal, but,” he turned to look at Will, eyes somewhat gentler. “You’ve never learned to reach for them. Let alone *use* them.”

“Like… what?” Will eyed him skeptically.

“You’ll see.” Hannibal slipped his hands into his pockets and turned to face Will. The therapist’s gaze fell to the floor in a troubled, thoughtful frown. “That said, I won’t claim that your concerns are entirely baseless. Your pheromone production seems to be picking up, and while I maintain that the disdain you have for alphas is disproportionate… considering the things we’re seeing in Baltimore right now, I can’t deny that there are people out there who would harm omegas, if given the chance.”

“... Right.” Will sighed, leaned back in his seat and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, this is turning out to be a lovely exploration of my gender so far.”

“Will.”

Hannibal’s voice was suddenly so serious, so intense, that Will felt compelled to look back to him. Hannibal sent him a look that was gentler now. It transformed his face into something Will could only categorize as ‘handsome’ - which, in turn, made him uncomfortable. He never used to categorize people’s faces before. Never even used to have that category.

“If it helps,” Hannibal went on, still with his hands casually tucked away in his pockets, “you might think of this as an exploration of *my* gender. This trip is my request and my responsibility. Knowing where you are, while we’re there, will put me at ease.”

To Will’s immense dismay, he felt something warm and fluttering crack open in his chest at those words. He couldn’t even name or pinpoint the feeling; he just knew it made the irritation drain out of him.

“Fine,” he muttered, tired now. “I won’t leave your side. For *your* sake. Just so we’re clear," he added, offering a small crooked smile. Hannibal let out an amused breath through his nose.

“We’re clear.”

“How long before I learn to use those tools you mentioned, though?” Will raised an eyebrow at Hannibal, who was making his way towards his chair again. “They sound nifty.”

“It depends,” said Hannibal and took a seat.

“On what?”

“On you. Have you read the book I lent you?”

Will blinked. He’d almost forgotten all about the ‘ *anthropologic journey’* , still resting on his coffee table back home. Now collecting dust after the one and only chance he’d given it, assuming Hannibal wanted him to read up on the history of betas.

“I only read a few pages,” he admitted.

“Of course you did,” Hannibal smirked knowingly. “And I’m assuming none of them mentioned omegas?”

“In my defense,” Will retorted dryly, “you just shoved that book into my hands and gave me a mysterious grin. I didn’t know which parts you *wanted* me to read, and I sure as hell didn't know you knew about... me.”

“I suppose I could have been clearer,” Hannibal concurred with a graceful nod. “In any case, I’d advise you to revisit the book. Read the parts that are relevant to you. I think you’ll find it interesting.”

“I’ll give it another go when I get home,” Will promised.

He regarded Hannibal for a few moments, enjoying how the atmosphere in the room warmed up. The older man smiled contentedly at him, threading his fingers together as he leaned back in his chair.

“How did you know, by the way?” Will asked.

“That you’re an omega?”

Will nodded.

“I’ve kept my gender a secret for years. I’ve worked alongside alphas ever since I enrolled in Baltimore police academy. No one has ever suspected a thing… except for you. How?”

Hannibal took his time working up a reply. His eyes were steady and warm and Will nearly forgot that they’d been fighting just two minutes ago.

“First of all,” Hannibal began, “I have a very keen sense of smell. That beta scent enhancer you wore… Even if I didn’t know the specific purpose of it, it was obvious that you were trying to hide something underneath all that artificial sandalwood.” He made a disapproving face and Will couldn’t help but to smile.

“You have something against sandalwood?”

“I meant what I said that day,” Hannibal admitted, rolling his shoulder slightly, as if trying to rid himself of an unpleasant memory. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Is that all?” Will questioned. “You thought my cologne was too intense and just… connected the dots from there? With deduction skills like that, you should consider a career within the FBI. I mean, you’d run circles around Jack,” he grinned. Hannibal responded with a smile and shook his head.

“No. That’s not all.”

“Then… what was it?”

“The way you looked at me,” Hannibal explained and turned his gaze to the bright windows, “that night. When you were forced to take Hobbs down. You were sitting on the sidewalk when I got there, and although you were in a deep state of shock, you… *looked* at me. It wasn’t just a look, Will.”

Will stared at the alpha. What the hell was he talking about? What look?

“Care to elaborate?” He asked, earning himself a warm but brief huff of laughter from the alpha.

“I’ll try, but I’d say it’s something you need to consciously experience in order to fully understand. The book I lent you might help illustrate this better, but…” Hannibal’s expression turned oddly solemn, as if he was talking about something sacrosanct. “Omegas in distress have the unique ability to… *command* alphas. To evoke a powerful emotional response that is exceedingly difficult to defy. To… protect, assist, retreat. All manner of things, really. It’s all primal instinct, stemming from our early ancestors. Some consider it a pseudoscience these days, but I’ve felt that pull once before, and when you looked at me that night, I recognised it.”

Will felt an odd tug at his heart, as if Hannibal explaining all of this was some kind of confession. Perhaps it was. Either way, this was news to Will. News he didn’t quite know how to feel about.

“Wow.”

“Yes, it truly is awe-inspiring.” Hannibal nodded, adjusted the knot of his tie and straightened in his seat, having adopted a more relaxed posture as he reminisced about that fateful night several weeks earlier. The night everything had *started* .

“Is that one of those tools I might some day learn to utilize?”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” Hannibal’s eyes lit up, an intense glow suddenly present in his gaze. “You should be careful, though. You could make an alpha lose all sense of control with that.”

Will regarded Hannibal for a second, teeth gritted and heart racing. *Unsettling* , he concluded. That's what it was.

"Do *you* ever lose control?"

Hannibal gave him an odd smile.

"I never have and I hope I never will. Lately, though, it's been… challenging."

Their gazes locked. Will felt as though his entire body was engulfed in a blanket of warmth and couldn't ignore the frightening notion of wanting to be closer to Hannibal. The distance between their chairs suddenly seemed enormous, even though they were only a few feet apart. He cleared his throat, averted his gaze and focused all his energy on cooling down, belatedly realizing that his fingers were digging into the fabric on his arm rests, as if he'd been subconsciously trying to hold himself back. If Hannibal noticed, he graciously pretended not to.

"So," he said, "tell me more about this vernissage." Will hoped the change of subject might help ease up the sudden tension in the room. "Is it a black-tie event? Or are we all expected to wear tie-dye?" Hannibal raised one elegant eyebrow at him, blinking slowly.

"You think tie-dye is a common dress code within the art community?"

"My third-grade art teacher wore tie-dye every single day, I'll have you know." Will felt his lips twitch into an amused smile and watched the sentiment reflect in Hannibal's expression.

"Ah, yes. And that stroke of expressive genius would have told you everything you need to know."

"Hannibal," Will sighed, crossing one leg over the other, gratefully latching onto the humor. "I know *nothing* about art, and if you were hoping to have insightful discussions about brush strokes and color contrasts, this trip might turn into a huge disappointment for you."

"Rest assured, I would never subject you to anything involving dunking your clothes into buckets of paint," Hannibal smirked. "We are expected to dress appropriately. More importantly, there will be plenty of mated couples there. It'll give you the chance to meet other omegas and be open about your own gender, without having to worry about seeing anyone you know. I suspect it might help you feel more at ease."

"... Perhaps," Will relented, but he felt his shoulders tense up. "I'll have no idea how to behave, though."

"Instead of focusing on your own behavior, how about you concentrate on how you're received?"

"What do you mean?"

“People don’t respond to pretend-betas the same way they do to omegas,” Hannibal pointed out. “And I imagine it’s been years since you were even perceived as an omega. It might be an eye-opening experience for you.”

“I *know* how omegas get treated,” Will muttered, “that’s why I started taking the suppressants in the first place.”

“Will,” Hannibal warned. “We’ve had this discussion already.”

“Right, the ‘shackles’,” Will drawled. “I’m biased, you’re trying to help. I get it.”

“We did make a deal.”

“We did,” Will sighed, definitely not in the mood for another argument. “And to that point; it’s supposed to be an exchange of service, Lecter. Give me the list.”

Hannibal stood up and approached Will’s chair, holding the envelope up between two fingers.

“I’ll give this to you, but I’d like to emphasize that we will be seeing people I regard as close friends, and that you’ll be attending the event as my partner. I expect you to behave in a manner befitting that position.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Will bristled. Hannibal gave him an unimpressed look and held the envelope back before Will could snatch it.

“You tend to get sulky and impervious when you are uncomfortable.”

Will gaped at the older man for a second, thoroughly offended, but ultimately admitted to himself that Hannibal was spot on. He did get sulky and impervious in situations that made him uneasy. It was a defense mechanism he’d perfected over the years; very effective in terms of keeping people at a distance. Which was where he generally liked them.

“I can’t promise I’ll be a picture of grace, but…” he grumbled, still holding out his hand. “I’ll try my best.”

“I certainly hope so,” Hannibal said and leaned down, towering imposingly over Will’s still seated form. Eyes intense and voice lowered, he continued. “And if you do feel uncomfortable, you’ll turn to *me*. Understood?”

He placed the envelope in Will’s slackening fingers. A waft of bergamot. A spark in Will’s chest. That sudden, subtle display of dominance was having an effect on him he hadn’t foreseen. The omega was stirring within.

Suddenly all Will could hear was the sound of his own pulse and the rustle of Hannibal’s suit as the alpha was straightening up. His hand shot out. Grabbed Hannibal’s tie. Kept the alpha down, over him. Hannibal’s eyes widened in surprise for a brief second, but quickly regained the composed calm that Will sometimes resented him for. Mouth watering, pulse hammering, longing swelling in his chest, he raised his chin and held Hannibal’s gaze.

Hannibal placed his hands on the arm rests of Will's chair and lowered his upper body further. Will's grasp on his tie tightened – the intense need to *hold* and *pull closer* and *possess* nearly overwhelming – and when Hannibal's jaw finally made contact with his own, Will closed his eyes.

Fuck. He smells good. So good.

Bergamot. Leather. And then something entirely unique. Something their combining scents created. Like a strong, pleasant brew.

Will's eyes snapped open, regaining focus. Hannibal watched him calmly. Pupils wide and deep, but calm. Will swallowed. Felt the longing in his chest turn into something smoldering, some that made his skin tingle. His eyes darted down to Hannibal's lips. And then-

"... -don't ever let the harlot take over, son."

Will's breath caught in his throat as a violent wave of scorching, nauseating shame washed over him. He swallowed again. Closed his eyes.

"I…" His voice came out a mere whisper, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm sorry. Without the suppressants I... I get all-"

"Don't apologize," Hannibal's deep voice made the hairs on Will's arms stand up. "And don't worry. I won't lose control. Never have-"

"-Never will. Right." Will gave a quick, crooked smile and slowly eased up the grip he had on Hannibal's tie. "How do you do it?"

"Resolve and practice," came Hannibal's reply. "You'll get there."

Slowly, the alpha leaned back, cold air invading their space as he put distance between them. Will's relief was mingled with an odd feeling of bereavement as the alpha took a step back.

Hannibal collected the envelope that Will had dropped on the floor. He handed it over, straightened up and proceeded to drag a hand through his hair and fix his tie. In less than two seconds, it seemed, he was back to his usual perfectly composed self. It almost annoyed Will, who still felt a little dazed and discombobulated.

Clearing his throat, Will reached for his briefcase – wanting to keep the envelope safe until he got back to Wolf Trap – when a knock came from the door leading to the waiting room, effectively freezing Will in his movements. He sent Hannibal a stricken look. Hannibal returned it with a shrug and started walking towards the door. Will snatched his bag up and fumbled with the zipper of the outer pocket. He barely managed to pull out the knitted scarf, which had been neatly wrapped up in a plastic bag and absolutely *doused* in the cologne he knew Hannibal hated. He threw it around his neck before he heard the click of the door opening.

He attempted a relaxed posture as he turned in his seat to see who it was. As it happened, the unexpected visitor turned out to be Alana Bloom. Her gaze was fixed on Hannibal, white teeth sparkling as she smiled, lips painted red. She hadn't noticed Will yet.

"Hannibal," he heard her say. "Good to see you again."

Something cold twisted inside Will's chest at the sight. As far as Will knew, the last time Alana and Hannibal were in the same room together, Alana had threatened to report Hannibal. Had they been in touch since then?

When she finally stepped inside the office he forced himself to smile at her. She looked surprised, perhaps even a little bit awkward, when she saw him, but quickly sent him a smile of her own.

"Will," she said, stopping in the middle of the floor, hands clasping together. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"I was just stopping by to… be polite," Will said awkwardly, wincing inwardly at himself and his lacking social skills. "But I was about to leave."

"Miss Bloom is here to collect the notes I've been keeping during our previous sessions," Hannibal explained, turning his back to Will as he stepped over to his desk. Will frowned. There was an odd tension in Hannibal's shoulders as he moved.

"What? Why?"

"Because I'm your new therapist," Alana filled in, her smile turning a little apologetic. "This wasn't how I was planning to break the news to you, but… Here we are."

Will gaped at her.

"My new therapist?" He got up from his chair, but didn't really know what to do with himself after that, so he stayed where he was. "I never- … I wasn't informed of this." He turned helplessly to Hannibal. "Why wasn't I informed?"

Alana answered in Hannibal's stead.

"I was contacted by your supervisors at the BSU just this morning, and they told me that you'd sent them an email about ending your therapy with Hannibal."

"I did, but I never asked them to find me a replacement," Will said with a scowl. Alana blinked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"They *assumed* that's what you were indirectly asking for," she explained, brow creasing in confusion at Will's obvious reluctance. "Will, you know you can't return to the field unless you've been cleared by a licensed therapist. They were going to contact you tomorrow and let you know. I don't see what the problem is. Don't you want to go back to work?"

“Of course I do,” he snapped, “but…” He sent Hannibal a questioning look. The alpha merely smiled at him, appearing thoroughly unbothered by what was happening – though he did send the scarf around Will’s neck a fully disapproving look.

“I think this will be good for you, Will. I met with Miss Bloom the other day and we agreed that the best course of action now is for her to take over,” he said, handing over a manila file to Alana. Will watched her open it up and look through the pages of personal information – *his* personal information. Information that he’d rather *not* share with her.

“Well, I disagree,” he declared vehemently. “Alana, we’ve known each other for years. I’m not comfortable-“

“Will, you know I consider you a friend, but I’m still a professional,” she said, looking through the file, nodding to herself. “And I already knew about your PTSD, *and* the hallucinations. And it’s not like I don’t already know what happened that night, with… Hobbs.” She sent him a sympathetic look. “And insomnia is treatable, you know. I happen to be good at that. It’ll be fine.”

Will sent Hannibal a look, but the alpha merely smiled at him. And then it dawned on Will that if insomnia was Alana’s biggest concern after having read his file, it was possible that Hannibal had… *omitted* certain details. Details he’d probably realized that Will didn’t want Alana to know.

How many rules was Hannibal willing to break for Will?

Still, this did come as a relief. He could talk about insomnia with Alana. Hell, he could even talk about the hallucinations - because he didn’t really suffer from them anymore, it suddenly occurred to him. When had he stopped seeing Hobbs? Was it after he’d told Hannibal? Was that all it took?

Will still didn’t regard himself as fully *sane* - he never really would - but Alana would be easier to fool than Hannibal. Will was sure of that.

“Fine. Don’t suppose I have a say in the matter,” he sighed, making sure to sound appropriately dejected and not at all relieved by this turn of events, and collected his things. “But for the record, I’m not entirely comfortable with this.”

“You’re never entirely comfortable, Will,” she teased and closed the file, looking up at him with a playful smile. He gave a good-natured scoff and started making his way towards the door, but lingered at the threshold and looked back over his shoulder.

The two therapists appeared to discuss something, but he didn’t care to listen in on what they were saying. He was much too troubled by something else. The cold, spiteful feeling in Will’s chest made itself known once more.

She was standing too close to Hannibal.

It occurred to Will that Alana didn’t normally wear red lipstick during work hours. He’d

known her long enough to know when she was dressing to impress. The blouse she wore enhanced her curves. She probably knew it, too.

And she was standing *too close* to Hannibal.

Suddenly, Hannibal's eyes locked onto his, over Alana's shoulder, just as she was brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. Will didn't look away, but instead stared back intensely.

Almost instantly, Hannibal took a subtle step away from the beta, distancing himself from her. He put his hands behind his back, smiling knowingly at Will. Their gazes broke as Hannibal politely turned his focus back to his conversation with Alana.

And Will left, trying to grapple with how appeased that had made him feel.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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(If you're thinking "Wait, Chicago? I've read this fic before and it sure as hell wasn't Chicago the first time around!"... you'd be absolutely correct. One very kind reader pointed out to me that Washington is actually rather close to Baltimore, hardly a trip that would require a flight - an embarrassing mistake on my part. Sorry about that, Americans. I really appreciate you pointing these things out to me; never hesitate to let me know when something doesn't make sense. :) I don't have a beta-reader right now, so I'm grateful for all the help I can get.)

Learning

Chapter Notes

Note: major revision in progress, March 2024

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of Will's fingers hitting the keys on his laptop filled the dimly lit kitchen, breaking the tense silence. He needed a shave, but had more dire things on his mind. He also needed a drink. That part he was willing to sacrifice a few valuable minutes for. He got up, cringing at the sound of the chair's legs scraping against the floor, and headed for his liquor cabinet. Opted for whiskey, which he decided to mix with the coffee that remained in his cup. The result was something like a poor man's Irish coffee – a strong, lukewarm brew, without the sugar and the whipped cream. He made a face at the taste, but enjoyed the feeling of alcohol burning down his throat nonetheless. He sat back down and regarded the screen with a contemplative frown.

Anna Howard, 29, French teacher at Baltimore language academy. Had a keen interest in tennis and cooking. Suffered from asthma as a child. Omega, unmated.

Hannah Price, 23, student (majoring in history). Volunteered at animal shelter. Enjoyed poetry readings and video games. Omega, unmated.

Emilie Donovan, 30, shopping assistant. Took ballet lessons as a teenager. Enjoyed playing the piano as well as visiting thrift stores for vintage clothes. Omega, unmated/courted by Mr. Thomas P. Richards, 34, alpha.

Rosie Andersen, 25, student (majoring in biochemistry). Enjoyed spending time in nature, going on hikes and painting. Omega, unmated.

Sofia Martinez, 27, chef. Moved to Baltimore recently (originally from Charlottesville) to assume position as sous chef at restaurant Bella Serata. Enjoyed sewing and knitting. Omega, unmated.

Sawako Koizumi, 27, librarian. Enjoyed reading as well as writing short stories. Frequently visited the gym and enjoyed weight lifting. Omega, unmated/courted by Mr. Mark Lincoln, 25, alpha.

Christina Cooper, 21, nurse trainee. Enjoyed baking, reading and going to the theatre. Omega, unmated/courted by Ms. Clara Abbott, 27, alpha.

Jane Doe, estimated age 20-25. Possibly recent immigrant, ethnicity believed to be East European. Scar tissue and traces of bruising in victim's face as well as upper arms suggest the victim has been subjected to abuse prior to her murder. Omega, unmated (courtship status unknown).

Will looked up in alarm as a car drove by outside his house. Having classified information in his house made him exceedingly paranoid. He kept expecting Jack to burst through the door with a team of SWAT agents, guns blazing. Which was, of course, a ridiculous notion – because Jack would *never* visit him in Wolf Trap. It was as though the man feared the countryside would devour him. Will couldn't help worrying. He wasn't accustomed to doing research this way. Ordinarily, all he had to do was ask, and people just gave him the information he required. *Legally*. He'd been pampered that way.

Once the car had passed and was out of sight, Will released a tight breath and turned back to his laptop, rolling his shoulders in an attempt to relax. The envelope Hannibal had given him turned out to contain several documents. The first one listed the victims' names, personal ID numbers and home addresses. The remaining five documents, however, offered a much more detailed observation of who the victims *were* – information likely provided by the victims' families and close friends.

Hobbies and interests. Romantic relationships. Hopes and dreams. Personal traits. Anything to find a link; a pattern.

So far, he couldn't see it. Other than the fact that they were all omega females, the killer seemed to choose his victims at random, and it frustrated him.

But the victims suddenly seemed so alive to him. So *real*.

Will had decided early on to put together a summarized list of his own and save it on his computer, once he'd gathered all the information he felt he needed, excluding the bits that were of no use, and then throw away the physical documents. Possibly burn them. He didn't want to put Hannibal's reputation in jeopardy, nor did he want incriminating documents lying around in his home. He was already nervous enough about the whole ordeal. Saving the information on his password protected laptop seemed safer.

He took another swig from his cup, grimaced as he swallowed, and shuddered. Midnight was drawing near and every cell in Will's body *demanded* sleep. And frankly, even if he stayed up for another hour or so, which was what his stubbornness wanted him to do, it wasn't like he'd be able to magically crack the case just from this. Having the victims' identities – except one – was definitely a step forward, but if there was a pattern to be found, Will couldn't see it. At least not yet. Possibly due to his increasing fatigue, but more likely because he still didn't have enough information.

They were all relatively close in age, but that didn't tell him much. They must have *something* more concrete than that in common. Maybe they all shared a past with the perpetrator? Perhaps they all went to the same school, a long time ago? Will checked the information once more.

Two of these victims aren't even from Baltimore. And one of them is a Jane Doe. Fuck.

Frustration welled up in him one more and he downed the cup in two big gulps, shivering from the excess alcohol. He'd give his left hand to be able to speak to the victims' relatives, friends and courtship partners. Ask the questions that Jack – or whoever conducted the interviews – clearly hadn't thought to ask. They'd only scraped the surface. Idiots, all of them.

He'd have to ask Hannibal. Perhaps he'd even manage to get another interview session greenlit. If so, Hannibal could ask the questions that *Will* wanted to ask them. Find out more. Hannibal could do that. Hannibal was capable. Hannibal was reliable. He was…

Hannibal.

Will slumped back in his chair, eyelids shuttering.

Will Graham, 34. Suspended FBI agent. A complete mess, mentally unstable, obsessed with dogs. Enjoys drowning his sorrows in whiskey and neglecting his need for sleep. Omega, unmated/faux courted by Dr. Hannibal Lecter, 42.

Will shivered again, but not from the whiskey. He still couldn't get used to the way the pressure over his chest eased up or how he suddenly became hyper-aware of his own skin whenever he thought about Hannibal. Much like his body screamed for sleep, it appeared to also be screaming for something else. Or rather, *someone* else.

Just like how Will knew that he'd eventually succumb to his fatigue by passing out on the couch, he was starting to understand, with a growing sense of dread, that he'd soon reach a point where he might succumb to... other bodily needs. Heck, it was already happening. His control was slipping. Just earlier that day, *he* had pulled *Hannibal* in for scenting. Willingly. Without being coaxed, without striking a deal. He'd just *wanted* it. And Hannibal had given it to him. Not to hold it against him, or to prove a point – but because Will wanted it. Simple as that.

Except nothing was ever simple. Not with Will, not with Hannibal. And, he suspected, not with their faux courtship. Though he chose not to dwell on such frightful notions.

Will leaned his head back with a sigh and dragged his hands over his face in an attempt to rid his eyes from the sting of tiredness. God, he was tired. But he didn't want to sleep. Not just yet. Physically, he was exhausted. Mentally and emotionally, however, he was too worked up.

He stood, rolling his shoulders some more, and headed for the living room. Perhaps a healthy dose of brainless media could lull him to a calmer state. That was initial plan, anyway. But as he flopped down on the couch, his gaze landed on a book resting on top of his coffee table.

True Nature: An Anthropologic Journey, part I
Apha, Beta, Omega - The Roots

He had promised Hannibal he'd revisit the book, and while he wasn't exactly an

anthropology enthusiast, it now tugged on his curiosity. Hannibal had seemed so adamant about it. And Will could probably stand to learn more about his gender, having spent nearly two decades with his head blissfully buried in the sand.

He reached for the book and leaned back against the sofa with a tired sigh, stretching his legs out on the table. Scanning the index, he quickly found a chapter named *Male Omegas – Early history* and flipped through the pages until he found it. The chapter began with an author's introduction and Will felt that was as good as any place to start.

We have reached a section of this book that I must admit enthuses me. In my years of research, nothing has continuously baffled me more than the anthropology of the omega. Let me start off this chapter by emphasizing that the modern-day perception of omegas differs markedly from how omegas were perceived a mere thousand years ago. Over the span of a millenia, the social status and normative constricts bestowed on the omega has fluctuated time and time again. A thousand years is undoubtedly a long time, relatively speaking - but we must be relative, because in the vast history of the earth and our species, a few thousand years go by in a flash. It is almost staggering to consider how society may sometimes evolve – and in some ways devolve *– in a matter of centuries, decades, and sometimes, mere years.*

In earlier chapters, we have been comparing the Alpha gender to that of a wolf pack's leader – which is a traditional and convenient analogy to use, seeing as society has often turned to and relied on the alpha for protection and ambitiousness in times of war and famine; though, as stated in chapter six, the analogy is ultimately inadequate. Humans are not wolves – we are a far more complex species. This becomes especially evident when we look at the omegas. For this introduction, with the aim to provide you with an equally convenient but inadequate analogy, we shall be traveling back in time to the Mayan civilization.
And instead of wolves, we will be comparing omegas to flowers.

Will's eyebrow twitched in irritation. Alphas were compared to ferocious wolves, while omegas would be represented by fucking *flowers*? He was strongly tempted to slam the book shut, but forced himself to keep reading, reminding himself that he *promised*.

"Roses are red, violets are blue, and then there are flowers that might just kill you." – Sarah Johnson, Midnight Verses*, 1982.*
Johnson is a modern example of how omegas have historically been compared to poisonous flowers, which are often extraordinarily fragrant and colorful, designed to attract and ensnare. The Mayans (particularly those during the classic era, c. 250-900 AD) adhered to that, which is why there are many temples devoted to the god Chuk-ta-ra, who was paradoxically a god of both love and despair. Chuk-ta-ra was commonly depicted as an omega and was worshiped by priests, chiefs and the lower classes alike. While chiefs were generally encouraged to mate with female omegas for the blessing of offspring and successors, Mayan priests - who were under no such pressures - often opted for male omegas, when possible. It was believed that mating with a male omega in heat would cleanse one's soul, restore spiritual balance, as well as having a generally fantastic time.

Will couldn't help the amused scoff that escaped him.

Aside from these benefits, there was one other thing that made male omega spouses truly

invaluable: their protective instincts. While female omegas, to this day, tend to be fiercely protective of their children – which in itself is a powerful trait – we find that the male omega tends to direct their protective instincts towards their spouses. One such protective ability that was held in particularly high regard in Mayan civilization, was the talent for detecting malicious intent from potential enemies; an intuitive trait that, following religious reform, would subsequently be thought of as supernatural nonsense. However, modern research has determined that male omegas are in fact commonly gifted with enhanced empathic abilities; for reasons we can only speculate on (Clarkson, "The Omega Experiment", 1998).

Additionally, records show that omegas have long since had some unnamed and entirely unique ability to use their pheromones in a way that would entrance or even incapacitate alphas who posed a threat; this is commonly referred to, quite simply, as the "command" (ibid). In the dark ages, however, this was predominantly thought of as witchcraft; with the unfortunate consequence of omegas learning to subdue this innate ability, to avoid prosecution. It was not until the late 19th century that speculations regarding this mysterious trait emerged as a contender on the scientific stage, and we still have much to learn. I would like to think you'll agree with me, when I say it boggles the mind to consider what female and male omegas alike might be capable of, if they were given the chance to utilize and hone their abilities. The current oppression of omegas is therefore, in my humble opinion, a complete and utter tragedy.
Let us take a closer look at…

By now, Will was utterly consumed. He was sitting with his back hunched forward, elbows digging into his knees, holding the book closely as his eyes hungrily tore through the pages. Section after section providing him with historical examples of omegas stepping up, saving the day, becoming legends and the subject of folklore, facing oppression, prosecution, death. But there was also bravery, ingenuity, royalty and triumph. Warriors. Philosophers. Emperors.

All the things he desperately needed someone to tell him twenty years ago. Things that, he figured, might have made it easier. Things that swelled in his chest.

A full hour passed before Will finally sunk deep into the cushions of his sofa and fell asleep with the heavy book resting on his stomach.

The sun woke him. He glanced at his wrist watch and learned that it was past ten. Quickly doing the math, he realized that he'd gotten well over eight hours of sleep. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept for that long without being disturbed by nightmares. Giddy from the feeling of actually being well-rested for once – albeit slightly hungover – Will stretched his arms out with a groan and looked around.

The first thing he noticed was that his dogs were still asleep. Winston and Coco were curled up by the fireplace, while Teddy had taken up the old armchair next to the couch. The rest of them, he imagined, had taken over his bed upstairs – something they tended to do when he wasn't sleeping in it. Little rascals.

The second thing he noticed was that the book had fallen to the floor. He lifted himself up on his elbows and reached down to grab it. That's when he noticed the third thing.

He had morning wood.

At first, he didn't know how to react. He just stared at the tent between his legs in mild surprise, too groggy to understand what was going on. But then he did. Will sat up slowly, hesitantly reached down to cup his erection – not necessarily to touch himself, but rather to investigate whether it was actually his dick straining against the fabric. It was.

Will experienced unwanted and untimely erections every now and then, sure, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd woken up with a hard-on. And this wasn't just some half-assed sort-of-erection caused by the regular swell of his vessels to ensure that his dick still functioned.

He was *hard* and the cupping felt *good* .

His hand flinched away as if he'd been burned, and the lustful intrigue budding within him was immediately replaced with nervous reluctance. His dogs were still sleeping innocently nearby and the idea of touching himself right then and there felt incredibly wrong. In fact, the idea of touching himself *at all* felt wrong.

He heaved himself up from the couch and tried to *wish* it away as he headed for the kitchen, where he drank a glass of water, turned the radio on and loaded up his coffee percolator with a new filter and ground coffee beans. For a minute or two, Will was actually succeeding in convincing himself that it would go away by itself and he'd soon be carrying on with his day like it never happened. But as he thoughtlessly wiped his hands off on his trousers after filling the percolator with water, he inadvertently made the fabric drag against his crotch, sending sparks flying up his spine.

He immediately tensed up, and then slowly sank down into a crouching position with a frustrated whimper, one hand holding onto the counter top, while the other pressed down between his legs.

Shit. Why now?

It wasn't going away. If anything, it was getting worse. At the slightest twist of his hand, his dick jumped in response, reducing Will to a quivering mess. The coffee percolator had already started gurgling. In less than ten minutes, the coffee would be ready. Will made up his mind.

He straightened up and walked out of the kitchen, like he was on auto-pilot, headed for the cupboard next to his bathroom, grabbed the first towel he spotted and went inside. The tiles felt cold under his feet, but then – *everything* felt cold against his burning skin. Even the air around him. He undressed quickly, without ever looking down, and entered the shower cabin.

It wasn't until he stood there, ready to turn the water on, that he finally gathered enough

courage to drop his gaze. He felt moronic. Like a kid who hadn't even realized that he *had* a dick. But he couldn't help it. It looked so grotesque compared to what he was used to. Larger, redder, *wetter* .

He closed his eyes with a bitter frown and turned the water on. It was cold at first. Part of Will hoped it'd make the problem go away, like cold showers tended to do, but it didn't. And then the water turned warm and the bathroom filled up with steam.

For a minute or two, Will just stood there, letting the spray of warm water wash over him.

The last time he'd touched himself, he'd been scared, angry and utterly gobsmacked. Everything had happened so quickly then. Hannibal, that bastard, had sent him straight into a state of total shock. It had made everything confusing and blurry. The fact that he hadn't crashed his car on his way home was nothing short of a miracle, really.

What happened that day had been a dark stain on his recent memory, and nothing he'd been hoping to have to repeat. He dimly remembered nerve endings being on fire and the pleasant heaviness of afterglow which lasted for a mere few seconds, but in hindsight, the thing he recalled the clearest was the subsequent panic. The shame. The cum stains. The *smell* .

Will took a deep breath. Things were different now. Weren't they?

He glanced down.

This was happening on *his* terms. He's the one who decided to do this. This was all on Will. Hannibal hadn't forced it out of him this time. Hannibal wasn't even there. And Hannibal needn't ever, *ever* , find out about this.

He reached down and grabbed himself loosely. Gave a few experimental strokes. Much like last time, Will found himself unable to look directly at it. So instead, he closed his eyes. Tightened his grip. Moved his hand up and down, the way he knew he was supposed to. Nothing really happened. It wasn't unpleasant, but it didn't *do* anything.

He was too nervous, he realized. Too focused on performing a task. Too unsure of how to *do* this. His brows knitted together in concentration.

Last time, he'd thought about Hannibal – albeit unwillingly. And yes, it had made him feel like shit afterwards. Like he was just out of control, and perverted, and *disgusting* for having such thoughts. For having reacted to Hannibal's scent and proximity and touch the way that he had.

Will slowed down and focused on his breathing for a minute. There was no denying that he was attracted to the alpha. Even if Hannibal hadn't pointed it out, Will wasn't actually so delusional and deeply buried in denial that he hadn't already connected those dots. Hannibal and his potent fucking pheromones.

But... unless Will had entirely lost his ability to read between the lines, Hannibal found him attractive as well. And for the first time since that realization, he had the cautious, careful,

fearful urge to explore how he felt about it. To be perceived as a potential partner. To be looked upon with... desire?

"Nothing to be ashamed of."

That's what Hannibal had said. Will swallowed. What if there really *was* nothing to be ashamed of?

The thought, sudden and seductive like a whisper, was so alien to him that he struggled to wrap it around his head.

If Hannibal thinks I'm attractive… Does he think about me?

His dick, which had been losing steam just a minute ago, suddenly swelled in his hand. Will's breathing turned heavier in his chest.

What would Hannibal want to do… with me?

Later, once this was over, he would theorize that it became easier to fantasize when he used Hannibal as a proxy: Hannibal was the one who was responsible for those images – not Will. That made it easier. Logical. Reasonable.

But for the moment, he allowed himself to just… feel.

His fist sped up around his dick, which was now quivering with each stroke and sending marvelous jolts of fire through his gut. Fearing he'd lose his balance, Will sank to his knees, one hand pressing against the wet tiles of the wall. The floor was hard against his kneecaps, but the discomfort was soon forgotten.

He imagined Hannibal being there with him. Imagined himself pressing his body up against Hannibal's. Their naked chests would slide against one another and Hannibal's eyes would be locked onto his, and the alpha would give him one of those confident smirks - the one that said all Will had to do was follow his lead, and allow this, and Will would agree to do so. Hannibal's hands would slide down his sides and grab a hold of his hips and press them together in a slow, sensual grind, and maybe he'd put his lips against the bend of Will's neck…

Will hissed and released a warm, shivering breath as his hand slowed down a little. Just a little. Jesus, was he trying to drag this *out* ?

… and lick him there, while pressing Will up against the wall, to hold him in place while he slipped a hand down between their wet bodies…

Another shivery exhale. Will pressed his forehead against the wall and scrunched his eyes closed as his body appeared to reach a new level of arousal, a new level of tantalizing pleasure that had not been accessible to him before. It was new and glorious and terrifying and he kept going.

… and wrap his fingers around the two of them together, hard cocks straining together in his firm grip, and all Will had to do was hang on and *allow* this, and then maybe… just maybe… Hannibal would reach behind Will with his free hand, and move it down, and his fingers would search tenderly… Until they found a part of Will's body that was so intimately private that he hadn't ever dared consider letting anyone touch him there, but all Will had to do was *allow* this, and maybe… Hannibal's wet fingertips would start to press…

Will came. Suddenly. Explosively.

A startled gasp tore through him. His fingers slipped frantically over his wet cock as his orgasm was wrung out of him in wave after wave of shimmering satisfaction. Chest heaving, head spinning, skin humming, he slipped his eyes open. His vision was blurry, but soon adjusted. He released his softening cock and let himself just sit there for a minute, breathing and feeling.

The cum on the walls soon washed away. The water was still warm. Will soon managed to stand up, even though his legs were wobbly. His breathing was still labored and he felt his pulse drum pleasantly throughout his whole body.

He reached for his shower gel and started washing himself off. Tensely. Apprehensively.

Waited for the panic to set in. Waited for the shame to hit him. He felt its presence. It burned the edges of his vision. But it stayed there. It didn't take hold. What used to be a deranged shout in his ear was now a mere whisper. It was still cruel, but it didn't have the same startling effect.

A minute passed. Then two. The bathroom soon smelled like Brazilian papaya, rather than sweat, slick and semen. Perhaps that's what helped keep it at bay. Regardless, Will was relieved. Three minutes passed. His skin still buzzed with contentment. He felt like he'd received a long overdue massage. Every muscle in his body felt loose, and once his breathing slowed down, that came easier, too.

He turned the shower off and stepped out to dry himself off. The mirror was fogged up, so he wiped the corner of his towel over the glass to take a look at himself. Wanted to make sure it was actually him. That he hadn't been replaced in his sleep. It was just so unlike him to feel this *good* . To *allow* himself to feel that good.

He stared into his blurry reflection and raised a confused eyebrow. Were his eyes always that blue?

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Sandalwood

Chapter Notes

Note: major revision in progress, March 2024.

Those of you who've read this chapter before may notice more substantial editing here. This chapter has been the bane of my existence. I've edited it before, on several occasions, but it's kept bothering me. I came to the conclusion that it was time to kill some proverbial darlings. Personally, I think this works better. I hope you'll enjoy the updated version, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The atmosphere in the BSU headquarters was tense and hurried as Hannibal walked in. Several agents were walking around carrying files, cables and spare laptops, wearing identical expressions of irritated stress. He raised a critical eyebrow as a woman bumped into him, staring down at the document in her hand whilst biting her lip nervously, and continued walking without apologizing or even acknowledging his existence.

He spotted Jack standing outside his office, scowling as he conversed with two younger agents – one of which had red flecks of anxiety decorating his cheeks, while the other had loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt.

Jack met his gaze and waved him over, muttering a swift dismissal to the agents, who scurried off in opposite directions. Hannibal gave Jack a mildly amused smile as he approached. Jack rubbed his forehead with a sigh.

“How are you holding up, Jack?”

“Barely,” Jack replied with a tired frown. “We’re updating our network security system, but now we can’t access the internet. Standard procedure, we do it every year, but things always get a bit… hectic, and this was the last thing we needed.” He gestured for Hannibal to follow him into his office. Hannibal closed the door as Jack took a seat behind his desk.

“Yes, your staff seems to be under some pressure,” Hannibal commented and remained standing, opting not to take a seat. He’d be leaving soon, anyway. Jack chuckled breathily.

“They are,” he nodded, and then muttered, “Damn millennials. No internet means *physical* labor,” he pointed out dryly. “ *Carrying* files to other departments rather than emailing, reports being delayed… Everything slows down when we’re stripped of our technology, so

we're forced to work overtime. That's progress, I guess," Jack laughed, though the stress remained obvious in the lines around his eyes.

"Good thing they have you to see them through it," Hannibal pointed out with a smile, determined to remain on the man's good side. It came with benefits that Hannibal couldn't afford to lose. Jack shrugged but ultimately seemed to appreciate the comment.

"Yeah, well…" He peered curiously at Hannibal. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I wanted to let you know that I'll be traveling this weekend. I'm going to Chicago."

"Chicago, huh? Business or pleasure?"

"A friend of mine is hosting a vernissage at one of his hotels. He's invited me to stay there."

"That sounds nice," Jack sighed mournfully. "Certainly beats spending the weekend cooped up here. I'll probably spend the night on *that* ," he pointed to a stiff-looking leather couch by the wall. "My wife won't be pleased. And she's scary when she's angry."

"Sorry to hear that," Hannibal smiled sympathetically before he continued. "Anyway, I wanted to make sure you knew, in case something happens while I'm away. I won't be able to physically come to your aid, but you have my phone number. Don't hesitate to give me a call. I'd like to stay as updated as I can."

"Of course," Jack nodded. "I won't hold back. But let's hope I won't have to disturb you this weekend. Enjoy your trip, doctor Lecter."

"I will," Hannibal said and held his hand out for Jack, who stood up behind his desk, grabbed Hannibal's hand firmly and shook. Then he blinked. Leaned closer and inhaled through his nose. A sly, playful smile formed on his tired features as he finally let go of Hannibal. Hannibal's eyebrows knitted together slightly. "What?"

"Who's the lucky one?" Jack smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. Hannibal raised an eyebrow without saying anything. Jack gave him a pointed look. "Come on, doctor, don't be coy. There's a subtle hint of something… sweet? An omega?"

Hannibal gritted his teeth together but somehow managed to produce a polite smile. He hadn't expected Will's scent to be so prominent that others would be able to pick up on it yet - he'd scent marked potential mates in the past and it always took a few weeks before it became noticeable to outsiders. Then again, male omega pheromones were potent, and Jack was an alpha. This shouldn't have come as a surprise. But it did - and he found that it was a rather pleasant one.

Despite the possessive pride swelling deep within in chest, however, Hannibal contained himself.

"No use denying it," he said – because there really wasn't. "But I'm afraid the omega's identity shall remain a secret for now."

“Why?” Jack grinned. “Do I know her?”

Hannibal sighed and opened the door.

“Good bye, Jack.”

“Are you taking her to Chicago?” Jack called after him, amusement evident in his voice. “Traveling for *pleasure* indeed!”

Hannibal smirked at him over his shoulder.

“Enjoy your weekend on the couch.”

Jack’s satisfied smile melted off of him as he threw a reluctant glance on said piece of unwelcoming furniture and Hannibal laughed softly as he exited the office.

Will glanced around his living room with an odd sense of unfamiliarity. It reminded him of the feeling he got when he first moved out – his old bedroom eerily empty and strange-looking as it had been stripped of the furniture and the posters decorating his walls.

He’d already dropped his dogs off at his neighbor’s farm, where they’d be spending the weekend while he was in Chicago with Hannibal. Widow Johnson was well into her sixties but maintained a strong physique and a firm hand. She and her late wife used to breed German Shepherds, so she was used to handling many dogs at the same time, making her a perfect dog-sitter.

Will knew his pack would be safe with her and he couldn’t deny that he was looking forward to spending a few days away from Wolf Trap, freed of the responsibility to take the dogs out for walks and putting out multiple bowls of dog food and water every morning. Not that he didn’t love the canines – he gladly did everything he could to make sure they were healthy and happy, but man. It got to be exhausting at times, and currently, he had enough on his plate as it was.

Without the dogs, though, Will’s house seemed empty, spacious and quiet. He didn’t like it.

Hugging himself briefly, he glanced up at the clock on his wall. Hannibal would be there to pick him up soon. He went over his mental list of things he needed to bring with him once more, wanting to make absolutely sure that he didn’t forget anything. Not that it would be a disaster if he did – they’d only be gone for two days and there were obviously plenty of stores in Chicago – but still. Will wasn’t in the habit of traveling and the whole ordeal made him nervous.

Pajamas, check. (Well, “pajamas” was a stretch – he slept in an old t-shirt and a pair of shorts.) *Tooth brush, check. Two sets of clothes, check. Books, check. iPad, check. Charger…*

Will snapped his fingers and hastily went into his kitchen. He tore through the many objects occupying his kitchen table until he found the charger and sighed in relief. He stuffed it into the outer pocket of his jacket.

Charger, check.

He placed his hands on his hips and looked around once more, feeling restless and out of place.

Now what?

He still had a few minutes to kill, which really didn't seem like much time at all, but his nerves made him jittery. He wished Hannibal would just show up already so that they could leave and get it over with. He took a seat on his sofa and closed his eyes briefly.

Recalled the startling moment earlier that morning, when he realized he'd packed his suppressants without thinking about it.

Will wasn't much of a traveler, but leaving his house for more than a day without taking the jar of pills with him was still such an unfathomable notion that Will hadn't even thought twice about throwing it into his bag, along with his toothbrush.

After realizing that he'd packed them, despite knowing that he wasn't supposed to take them, despite knowing that they wouldn't even *work* , he found himself struggling with the idea of leaving the jar in his bathroom.

Chicago seemed so far away.

He did, eventually, begrudgingly, put them back in the cabinet. Bringing them wouldn't do him any good.

He had, however, brought his cologne with him – wrapped up in the same scarf Will had worn the other day, when Alana visited Hannibal's office. Just in case. Hannibal's words echoed forebodingly in his head.

"Your pheromone production seems to be picking up… can't deny that there are people out there who would be willing to harm omegas…"

If it ever came down to it, Will hoped Hannibal would understand. They weren't attached at the hip, and although Will had promised Hannibal that he wouldn't leave his side – a promise he intended to keep – who knew what the weekend had in store for them? There weren't any guarantees. Knowing he had an ace up his sleeve in the form of something as simple as sandalwood cologne made him feel safer, even if he hoped he wouldn't have to use it. Hannibal certainly wouldn't approve.

He sighed heavily and peered down at himself. He was dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt, wanting to be as comfortable as possible during the flight, which was a form of

transportation he didn't particularly enjoy. The dark blue sweatpants were a little too big and, in all honesty, looked dreadful on him. He knew he'd look stupid next to Hannibal, who always dressed impeccably, and the idea weirdly entertained him for a second. He could already imagine a skeptical crease appearing on Hannibal's forehead and let out an amused scoff. Hannibal was starting to feel familiar. Less like an imposing, condescending stranger and more like someone who might…

Lines had been crossed. He'd started taking liberties.

Will flushed as he recalled his shower activity earlier that week. How good he'd felt. How much he'd wanted to do it again – the urge striking him repeatedly over the course of the last few days. Will hadn't allowed himself to give in, no matter how tempting it was. If these new *compulsions* were going to be a regular occurrence, Will felt it'd be best to practice some self-restraint. He still wasn't comfortable with his newly awakened desires and would much rather have them go away for good. That'd make everything so much easier.

He theorized that the sudden urges were a mere side-effect of ceasing his medication so suddenly. A result of his hormones being free to run amok, after years of being pushed down and subdued by various chemicals. If that was indeed the case, Will wasn't sure he *wanted* to lead a non-suppressant lifestyle.

Not if it meant having an actual sex drive. He shuddered.

Omegas were generally thought of as excessively lustful creatures. Good for a fuck, not much else. That's what Will had grown up to know anyway. That's what he'd been told by those around him. At some point, Will thought bitterly, he may even have *shared* those opinions – until he found out that he was an omega himself.

Things had changed then. *Everything* had changed that day. The day he'd *presented* . His dad never looked him in the eye after that. The older man's gaze had always shifted slightly to the side – as if just *looking* at Will was a sin that would damn his soul.

He shook his head, squeezed his eyes shut and suppressed a shiver. He didn't want to think about it. So he didn't. Shoved it back, far back, deep down, until he couldn't see it anymore.

When he opened his eyes, his gaze fell on the heavy book on top of his coffee table. The one he'd devoured in just a few days. The knot lodged in his throat eased up. Pulse slowed down. He leaned forward and stroked his hand fondly over the hard cover with a soft, barely-there smile. He'd learned a lot. Not just about omegas, but about alphas, too. It had been an enlightening read.

Will tensed up slightly as he heard the familiar sound of tires against the gravel of his driveway. He got up and walked into the kitchen to look out the window. Hannibal's sleek BMW was parked outside and Will felt something in his chest tighten pleasantly at the sight. Hannibal stepped out and met Will's gaze through the window. The alpha smiled at him and gave a wave. He was dressed casually – by his standards anyway – in an ensemble of beige chinos, a black button-up and a black wool coat. Perched on the bridge of his nose was a pair of pilot sunglasses.

Will felt his cheeks warm up, despite his best efforts. He was, to his horror, becoming increasingly aware of the fact that Hannibal was good-looking. Not traditionally handsome, but his features were regal and sharp. Combined with his tall stature, his lean build and the way he carried himself, Hannibal was an undeniably beautiful alpha.

Will woefully thought back to a simpler time – a time when he hadn't bothered to actually *look* at people for long enough to know whether they were attractive or not. How easy it had been, to live in that kind of blissful obliviousness.

Will swallowed, dry throat clicking, suddenly regretting his decision to wear the baggy sweatpants and the sweatshirt. The idea of looking like an absolute mess next to Hannibal suddenly didn't quite have the same entertaining charm. Deciding to ignore this, and definitely not having the time to change anyway, he stalked over to the front door, where he put his jacket on and grabbed his bag.

He made his way out of his house, locking the door behind him, and walked over to Hannibal's car without looking at the older man even once. It wasn't until they were both seated in the vehicle that Will threw a tense glance to Hannibal – only to immediately release a huff of laughter.

Hannibal was regarding Will's sweatpants with a none-too-subtle frown of dislike, which succeeded Will's expectations. He cleared his throat and pressed his lips together to compose himself. Hannibal's own expression brightened into one of rueful amusement.

"You're wearing them to spite me," he drawled, a smile tugging at his lips.

"You're very predictable," Will buckled his seatbelt, feeling his own lips stretch out into an amused smirk. "And a snob."

"You realize we're going to a five-star establishment?" Hannibal asked idly and put his arm on Will's headrest, turning over his shoulder as he backed the car out onto the road.

"This'll come as a shock to you, but I have in fact packed a suit," Will raised an eyebrow at the alpha. "I just like to be comfortable when I travel."

"Ah. Well. Wouldn't want to compromise your comfort," Hannibal sighed, gave the sweatpants another dismayed look, though it was more in jest now, and started driving. Will regarded the alpha for a moment, smile lingering, and allowed himself to enjoy the warmth that settled in his chest.

The flight itself wasn't a problem at all. In fact, Will quite enjoyed himself, to his own great surprise. He and Hannibal solved crosswords together, had some coffee and snacked on peanuts. All in all, a very typical and undramatic flight. Soon enough, they landed, exited the plane, and went to retrieve their luggage.

Will had initially planned to bring his small suitcase with him into the cabin, as he'd packed lightly, but as they were checking in, the bag still somehow turned out to exceed the carry-on weight limit. Rather than paying the fee for extra weight - which Hannibal had offered to do - Will decided to check it in as luggage, since it was already included in his ticket.

That turned out to be a mistake.

His suitcase wasn't the hard-shell type, and Will had packed scarcely. This meant that there was plenty of room inside the bag for his things to tumble around, and if something heavy – say, a much bigger suitcase – was to land on top of his small, soft bag, something could potentially break.

Like, for instance, a small glass flask, haphazardly wrapped up in a thin scarf.

Will's suitcase reeked of sandalwood when it appeared on the baggage carousel. He reached out for it, grabbed the handle and held the soiled bag up in front of him with a sense of impending doom.

Gently putting it down on the floor, Will unzipped the top half and opened it.

Though Will had been using the cologne for several years, even *he* recoiled at the cloud of heady fragrance that hit him in the face, the artificial smell much more concentrated than he was used to. Nausea instantly made itself known in the back of his throat and he scrunched his face up in disgust. And then he felt Hannibal's stare prickling at his neck.

Tensely, he turned around to face the alpha.

"We have a problem." Will gestured reluctantly to his ruined luggage.

Hannibal stared blankly at him for a moment. Will felt discomfort crawl up his spine and settle in his shoulders from the way the alpha's eyes pinched every so slightly.

"Wait here," Hannibal eventually said, and walked away. Will was left alone, still crouched down by his drenched suitcase, cursing himself repeatedly for not having packed more carefully. For having decided to bring the cologne in the first place.

Will sighed, tilting his head back and closing his eyes as frustration washed over him. He anxiously wondered what the alpha was up to.

A crisp, rustling sound suddenly came from the left and Will opened his eyes to see Hannibal having returned, with a huge white plastic bag. He gestured for Will's suitcase.

"Help me get your suitcase into this," Hannibal said, tone indecipherable, and Will did as he was told. Hannibal's expression was as unbothered and gentlemanly as ever, as if stuffing soiled suitcases into trash bags was nothing out of the ordinary for him, but for a split second, Will saw the man's face twist at the scent, eyebrows knitting together briefly. There and gone, in a flash. Will cringed and looked away.

Damnit...

Not trusting his voice, Will clamped his jaw shut and swallowed. Once his suitcase was wrapped up in the white plastic bag, he used the remaining material to tie a knot, making the whole package resemble a lumpy bag of trash. At least it helped with the stench.

He waited quietly, while Hannibal retrieved his own suitcase and then followed the alpha out of the airport. There was nothing objectively wrong with the way the alpha carried himself, or the way he glanced back every now and then to ensure Will was keeping up, lips curved in the gentle, barely-there smile he so often donned. But Hannibal didn't say another word, and Will didn't dare to, either. And so, an uneasy silence that Will wasn't at all accustomed to, or knew how to break, stretched out in between them.

Will wasn't exactly scared of conflicts, even if he didn't particularly enjoy them. Confronting Hannibal wasn't something he'd normally hesitate to do, if he felt it was necessary – but this was decidedly different in the sense that Will felt unsure of whether it *was* necessary. Whenever he managed to catch Hannibal's gaze, he couldn't see anything that might indicate that it was. There was no scowl, no tension around the eyes, no overt signs that Hannibal was agitated.

And yet, Will swore he could feel Hannibal's tense mood roll off him in languid waves, like cold steam, and the silence persisted.

They waved a cab over and wordlessly packed their luggage into the trunk before slipping into the backseat. Hannibal told the cab driver to head into the city and they took off.

Will nervously glanced at the man beside him. Hannibal was looking out the window, hands clasped casually in his lap. The cab driver turned on the radio and the car was filled with the hiss of static for a moment as he searched for a clear reception.

"Hannibal." Will waited for the alpha to face him. When he did, there was still nothing overtly wrong with the way the man glanced at him, eyebrow slightly raised in question. Nothing, aside from the silence, was out of the ordinary. Will felt the beginnings of a headache blossom at his temples. "Is everything alright?"

This, given the circumstances, seemed a ridiculous question to ask, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Of course," Hannibal said, voice soft as silk, and shot Will a warm smile. Will should've relaxed at the sight of that, but he didn't. Something was off. Something he couldn't pinpoint or define. Against his better judgment, spurred on by the sliver of anxiety that was now cutting uncomfortably into his chest, Will decided to do something he very rarely chose to do if he could avoid it: he decided to prod.

"You sure?" He asked, keeping his voice on the quieter side, not overly keen to have their taxi driver listen in. "Because I… I understand that bringing scent blockers sort of defies the whole reason we're here."

Because Will wasn't supposed to hide. The whole point was for Will to experience what it was like to fully step into the position of an omega. And Will would readily admit that bringing the cologne felt distinctly *wrong* . Like bringing a cheat sheet to an exam, or smoking behind the gym. He'd never done either, but he imagined that's what it felt like. Overstepping, ever so slightly. Hoping he wouldn't get caught.

Will held his breath and waited for Hannibal's reaction. But the alpha only tilted his head slightly to the side and gave Will an unconcerned look.

"Will, it's fine."

It wasn't fine. Will was almost certain of that. But when Hannibal looked at him like that, with the sun shining brightly outside and the soft blues from the radio filling the car, Will allowed himself to relax a little. He wanted to believe it was fine. That he was the one over-thinking this, as he so often did. When he thought about it rationally, it wasn't as though he'd done something completely irredeemable, was it? He'd brought a life line. Perhaps the therapist really did understand.

Perhaps this odd atmosphere wouldn't have bothered Will so much, if it hadn't been for the memory of spending that morning with Hannibal creating such a stark contrast to whatever it was that was happening now. The mood had been pleasant then. They'd laughed together. Shared good-natured banter. Hannibal's confident smile had made tense knots hesitantly unfold in Will. Made him forget how nervous he was about the trip and what awaited him in Chicago. It had been nice. And Will desperately wanted to return to that.

"Lynx hotel you said?" The chauffeur asked over his shoulder after turning the radio off and Will looked over to Hannibal, who turned his attention forward.

"Actually," the alpha said, "could you possibly take us to the nearest dry cleaner?"

"Sure thing," the driver said, humor evident in his tone. "Wouldn't have anything to do with that wrapped-up suitcase in the back, would it?"

"It would," Hannibal said simply, a polite smile in place as he leaned back in his seat and fished his smartphone from his pocket, effectively shutting down any attempts from the driver to keep the conversation going. Will watched him for a moment, then turned away to look out the window. Apprehension lingered in him. He couldn't explain what he felt, other than it making him uncomfortable. He could just barely pick up on Hannibal's scent from where the alpha sat. Bergamot. Fresh and masculine and steadying, and yet…

What is *it?*

He snapped out of his concentrated - and futile - effort to distinguish his unease when he realized what Hannibal had just said. Dry Cleaner. Of course. They couldn't drag his reeking suitcase with them to a five-star hotel, they'd probably be asked to leave - and either way, they had to do *something* . Every single garment that Will had brought was drenched in artificial sandalwood, including the outfit he'd planned on wearing later in the evening. God,

it hadn't even occurred to him. He so rarely paid any attention to unnecessary details such as what to wear or how it made him look.

He threw another cautious glance at Hannibal. The alpha was idly scrolling through his phone, pausing every so often to type something.

"Sorry. I've made a mess of things," Will said, feeling subdued and guilty, and he still couldn't shake the feeling that something was off, like something stabbed at Will's consciousness.

"It'll be alright," the alpha said, still scrolling through his phone. "I'll sort it out."

Was it just Will, or had there been the slightest hint of an edge to Hannibal's voice just now? He didn't have time to give it any further consideration, because the cab pulled up on the side and when Will looked through the window, he found they were parked in front of a shop with a large neon sign that said *Queen Cleaners* . Hannibal leaned forward to give the driver his card.

"Want me to stick around?" The man asked, peering at them through the rearview mirror.

"If you would," Hannibal said with a nod and left the cab. Will scrambled to follow him - he wasn't going to let Hannibal, who practically looked like European royalty in his classy ensemble, carry Will's trash bag luggage into that shop. This was Will's mess, and he'd be damned if he just sat back and let Hannibal take care of it for him. It was embarrassing enough as it was.

Will approached the back of the car. The trunk opened for them, and before Hannibal could reach in, Will quickly grabbed a hold of the white trash bag and lifted it out. Though it was wrapped up in plastic, Will still caught a whiff of the cologne when he held it to his chest and almost gagged; sensitized from the intense exposure at the airport. The headache that had previously been a vague throb intensified as a new wave of nausea went through him. With a grunt, Will put the bag down on the sidewalk for a moment, just to catch his breath, and felt a hand land firmly on his shoulder.

"Let me," Hannibal said, reaching for the bag, but Will shook his head.

"I know you hate the smell of it," he argued and shot Hannibal a careful look. "Besides, I'm the one who screwed up. Least I can do is carry it inside."

"Fine."

Again, was it just Will? He turned again to look closer at the alpha. Hannibal's expression was carefully arranged in gentlemanly patience, a small smile curving his lips, but when Will looked into the man's eyes, he felt something stab at him again. More urgent this time.

He's unhappy.

Given the circumstances, it wasn't at all surprising, but Hannibal kept insisting everything

was fine. Will felt as though he was missing something.

“Hannibal…” Will hesitated, searching the alpha’s gaze until Hannibal eventually lifted an eyebrow at him. For the briefest moment, Will saw the shadow of disquiet flicker in Hannaibal’s eyes. It could’ve been mere confusion at the way Will stared at him, or… something else. Something else entirely. Will tried to reach for it. Failed. This wasn’t a crime scene and Hannibal’s wasn’t a culprit; he couldn’t just arbitrarily enter the man’s headspace whenever he felt like it. It simply didn’t work that way - though Will desperately wished it did.

“Let’s not keep the taxi waiting,” Hannibal suggested, and all Will could do was nod defeatedly. He carried the trash bag inside, noticing the way Hannibal lingered just behind him, and felt a very startling flush of warmth and dread rush through him when Hannibal’s fingers brushed over the curve of his back ever so softly to usher him inside, before they were gone again.

“How can I help you?” The young man behind the counter greeted them as they approached, and Will made a reluctant face.

“Cologne bottle broke in my bag,” Will tersely explained, while Hannibal silently placed himself at his side. “I need you to dry clean my luggage.” The young man gave the trash bag in Will’s arms a look.

“I see,” he said, and hummed. “If it’s a very strong smell, dry cleaning isn’t very effective, I’m afraid. We do have a laundry service, though. We could have everything washed and steamed by tomorrow morning. Are any of your garments very delicate?”

“Well… There’s a suit in here,” Will said, glancing down to the bag. “And I was planning on wearing it tonight.”

The young man sucked in air through his teeth and gave Will a sympathetic look.

“Yeah, um… If it’s for tonight, I’d suggest maybe looking into other clothing options.”

Will closed his eyes, immediately tensing up at the realization that the situation had gone from bizarre, embarrassing and inconvenient, to something much worse. They’d been in Chicago for less than an hour, and Will had already fucked the entire thing up. Over such an idiotic thing, too. Humiliation seared in his veins.

“Shit,” he whispered frustratedly to himself.

“How much for the laundry?” Hannibal asked from where he stood to Will’s left, and resolutely handed over his card. Will stared just as resolutely at the floor while Hannibal discussed the finer details with the young man and lifted Will’s trash bag to the counter. After a minute or so, Will was handed a smaller plastic bag containing his iPad, his books and other knick-knacks.

Once they were out on the streets again, Will suddenly shuddered and stopped in his tracks.

He felt chilly and miserable and absolutely fucking ridiculous in his too large, mismatched sweatpants and sweatshirt - which he and Hannibal had laughed over together just hours ago - and the headache intensified further. He watched Hannibal make his way back to the taxi, but remained standing on the street. He wrapped his arms around himself when a gush of chilly air swirled over him.

“Will?” Hannibal had noticed he wasn’t coming and returned to where Will was standing. Will, having already spent well over forty minutes feeling guilty and awful and frustrated that Hannibal was acting so unconcerned, suddenly felt a spark of irritation ignite in him. It was unreasonable of Will to feel irritated with Hannibal when *he* was the one having caused this whole mess, he knew that. Logically. But Will had come to learn that his emotions didn’t speak logic.

“Do you want me to leave?” He asked, voice laced with tired bitterness.

“Excuse me?”

“Do you want me to go back to Baltimore? Forget this whole thing?” Will kept his eyes stubbornly directed to the ground as he spoke. “I wouldn’t blame you. I’m a walking disaster, I brought the scent blocker, and now I don’t have anything to wear tonight, and I *know* you’re angry, and it’s really fucking stressing me out.” He swallowed tightly after the uninterrupted stream of words and the admissions he’d made, and looked up at Hannibal. “But I’m guessing you’re too much of a gentleman to actually tell me to go back, so I’m saving you the trouble. Do you want me to leave?”

“Have I given you any indication that I’m angry?” Hannibal asked, looking mildly perplexed - but there was something guarded there, too. Not quite apprehension, but it was close.

“No,” Will said, gritting his teeth together against the frustration and the headache. “But you’re *something* . And I’ve done nothing but screw things up since we got here, so… you know.” He gave a sad little shrug and felt utterly pathetic. Like he was throwing some dramatic tantrum, even though they were both speaking calmly. “Just tell me what the hell is going on with you. Or book me a flight home. Just… Stop pretending everything’s fine.”

Hannibal just stared at him for a moment, eyebrows knitting together slowly. Will could clearly see a tick in the alpha’s jaw, before the man let out a sigh. Will was by now fully expecting Hannibal to tell him this whole thing had indeed been a mistake and that he’d drop Will off at the airport, so when Hannibal took a step closer to him, he snapped his head up in alarmed surprise. Hannibal regarded him calmly, but the impeccable mask of gentleness had been loosened. The alpha looked serious.

“I’m not angry with you,” he said slowly, as if wanting to make sure Will didn’t miss a single syllable. “And while I think I’ve made my opinions on your scent blocker rather clear, I’m not so unsympathetic that I wouldn’t logically understand why you felt compelled to bring it.”

“Then wh-”

“However,” Hannibal held up a hand to stop him, eyes pinching ever so slightly. “I’ll admit that it does… trouble me. I’m not your chaperone, Will. But I am an alpha. And, though the nature of our courtship is a mere simulation, I am technically *your* alpha, for the time being.”

Will stared at the taller man, feeling as though the tangle of threads he’d been wrestling with in his head was finally starting to unravel. Hannibal wasn’t angry that Will had gone against his wishes, or because he’d made a mess of things. No, this was something else. Something Will had completely overlooked. Hannibal continued.

“I had hoped,” he said, voice low and tense, “that you’d feel secure enough in my company that you wouldn’t feel the need to bring it. When I realized that you *had* , I…” The alpha cut himself off, squaring his shoulders. “It bothered me.”

Invalidation , Will’s brain supplied. An alpha’s emotional Achilles heel. *Shit* .

It had been right in front of him this whole time. The fact that this hadn’t dawned on him at some point was downright embarrassing. Will had just recently read about this, because once he’d finished the omega sections, he’d found himself desperately curious about the other genders. And perhaps *one* of the other genders, more specifically. Hannibal had told Will more or less directly that he was biased, and Will was beginning to see that, yeah, maybe he was.

But even if he *hadn’t* spent a full evening reading up on the alpha’s various needs, such as being able to protect, provide and care for their partners, Will should have known. Hannibal had indirectly told him that something like this might happen. That’s where their whole conversation had led, the day they agreed to go on this godforsaken trip in the first place.

“If you do feel uncomfortable, you’ll turn to me . *Understood?”*

Will sucked in a breath. It hadn’t just been a display of dominance and authority. There were layers to that demand.

“I… I’m sorry,” he said, racking his brain for more words, an explanation, a better apology. Hannibal shook his head softly, eyebrows still drawn together.

“Given the precarious situation we find ourselves in, my reaction to this is unseemly. I was trying to shield you from it,” he said gravely. “But apparently I’ve failed in that regard.”

“I wasn’t planning to use it,” Will insisted, searching the alpha’s eyes. “It’s just, being away like this, in a city I’m not familiar with, is a little…” Terrifying, he’d meant to say, but opted not to. Instead, he went with: “Overwhelming. I just wanted to know that I had it with me, in case anything unexpected were to happen. Like getting separated from you.”

Hannibal nodded, and when his gaze met Will’s, there was genuine warmth in his brown eyes.

“Understandable.”

“And I do,” Will went on, because now that he’d gotten started, he found it difficult to stop. “Feel secure. With you.” Once the words were out of him, Will struggled to comprehend what he’d just said. Was it the truth? Or was it merely an attempt to appease the alpha now that the core issue had been identified? Heat crept into his cheeks and he looked away, feeling awkward. When Hannibal spoke, there was a soft hint of rueful amusement in his voice.

“There’s really no need to humor me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” Will grumbled softly and wrapped his arms around himself against the cooling afternoon air. Hannibal appeared to take note.

“We should get going,” he said, gesturing to the taxi which was still patiently waiting for them. Will sent him a worried look.

“What are we going to do about tonight? I’m actually not so oblivious to high society etiquette that I think showing up wearing *this* is in any way appropriate.” He gestured to himself. Hannibal released a soft breath that sounded like a laugh.

“Don’t worry,” he said calmly. “I’ll take care of it.”

There was something about the way he said that that left Will unable to argue. Will eyed Hannibal warily, but eventually allowed himself to be coaxed back into the cab, relieved at the way Hannibal’s energy had stabilized. The atmosphere warmed up between them and when Hannibal turned to look at him, Will found himself returning Hannibal’s gentle smile, despite the persistence of the dull throb digging deeper into his skull.

Hannibal found himself staring contemplatively at his own reflection in the storefront window, hands kept gently clasped behind him, as he went over what had just happened. At which point, exactly, had he let the mask slip? What signals had he been sending out? What symptoms of his aggravation, which he thought he’d kept so carefully concealed, had Will picked up on? He came up empty-handed.

“I know *you’re angry, and it’s really fucking stressing me out.”*

Will hadn’t pin-pointed what Hannibal was feeling with precise accuracy, though anger certainly hadn’t been too far off the mark. But the fact that Will had detected anything *at all* was amiss… That’s what weighed on Hannibal now.

Hannibal had never been the kind of man who’d wear his emotions on his sleeve. If anything, he prided himself on being a man who controlled his emotions. Kept them in check, always. It’s what allowed him to keep a firm upper hand in most situations. Mask on, lips curved. Impenetrable, unreadable.

Enter Will Graham.

This was the second time in less than a fortnight that he’d failed to keep his impeccable

facade intact around the omega. The first time, he'd come dangerously close to losing his balance entirely. But he'd composed himself after that. Tightened his grip, fortified the walls. Had he left a crack somewhere?

He suddenly noticed the troubled wrinkle that had appeared between his brows and immediately smoothed his features out before turning away from his reflection.

He was stationed by a small table displaying bowties, whereas Will had been whisked away by an enthusiastic female clerk nearly twenty minutes ago. Hannibal had spent each and every one of those minutes going over the events of the past hour in his mind. He needed to get a grip.

"Sir?" The enthusiastic clerk appeared behind a corner in the far back of the store, smiling brightly at him. "We'd like your opinion on something!"

Hannibal followed her into a large fitting room, adorned with mirrors and a large armchair. In the middle of the room stood Will. Hannibal paused at the sight of him.

The ugly sweatpants and hideous sweatshirt had been replaced by a navy-blue suit jacket, matching pants and a white button-up shirt with matt black buttons. Will gave him an uncertain look and held up two neckties – one black and one cerulean.

"I can't decide which one's better."

Hannibal smiled and walked up to the younger man, scrutinizing his outfit from top to bottom, even though he knew it made Will nervous. Although the suit hadn't been tailored specifically for Will, Hannibal was pleased to see that the smooth fabric hugged him in all the right places, flattering Will's lean body.

He took the ties from Will and held them up in front of him. Eventually, he carefully brought the black tie around Will's neck. The collar of the shirt was already folded up. He smoothed the silky fabric out and started tying it into a standard knot. Will's hands came up around his.

"I can tie it myself," he said, voice oddly timid. The man clearly wasn't used to receiving this kind of attention.

"Indulge me," Hannibal said, lips twisting into a mild smirk when Will sent him a protesting look but ultimately dropped his hands and allowed Hannibal to continue. He finished the knot and gestured to the mirror behind Will, urging the omega to look at himself. And what a sight it was to behold.

Hannibal had always enjoyed the finer things in life. Fine wine. Fine music. Fine suits. They were things that distinguished him. Things that defined him. Showcased who he was, *what* he was.

Will, on the other hand, never seemed to care about what he put on his back. He was more of a 'whatever works' kind of dresser. Though he did wear something resembling a suit the night Hannibal made him dinner, it couldn't compare to this.

Will stared at himself looking utterly baffled, as if it hadn't occurred to him that he could look like that. Hannibal captured the other man's gaze in the mirror and, with deliberate firmness, placed a hand on Will's back.

"Not bad." He let his thumb rub gently over Will's spine, earning himself a shiver from the omega. Hannibal took note of the way Will's complexion reddened and, deciding he didn't want to make the omega needlessly uncomfortable, he removed his hand and turned to the clerk. "Would you mind bringing us some tie pins to look at?"

"Certainly! I'll be right back!" She chirped and disappeared out the door.

Will turned away from the mirror and glanced down at himself, expression reluctant and uneasy.

"Hannibal, this suit is… *really* expensive." Will pressed his lips together and looked at him. Hannibal stepped closer to him, but resisted the urge to reach a hand up to rest against Will's nape.

"I told you I'd cover all expenses."

Will looked unhappy but nodded anyway – probably realizing that they didn't have any other option. The omega brought his hand up to adjust the knot around his neck. A waft of sandalwood hit Hannibal as he did this. His dislike must've been evident on his face, because Will frowned at him and brought his fingers to his nose.

"Damnit," he said, frowning in mild revulsion. "Some of it must've gotten on my fingers. Hope it goes away once I take a shower. It's already given me a headache."

"A shower would probably help with both," Hannibal said. Will nodded.

"God, I hope you're right," he sighed, bringing his other - presumably cleaner - hand up to rub at his forehead. "One thing's for certain - I'm never wearing that cologne again."

"I'd call that a silver lining," Hannibal commented. "I would've doused your wardrobe in sandalwood right from the start if I'd known how effective it would be."

Will looked up at him, lips broadening into a dry but ultimately warm smile. The tense mood from earlier had been lingering ever so softly, but it dissipated entirely now. Hannibal regarded Will for a moment. Was now the time to tell him?

"I went to visit Jack in his office yesterday, to let him know I'd be gone over the weekend."

"Oh?" Will raised an eyebrow. "Was he mad?"

Hannibal paused for a second, not entirely sure Will was ready for this specific piece of information. He decided to tell him anyway.

“He asked me outright if I was being courted.”

“What?” Will’s eyes went huge. Hannibal nodded and leaned in just a little bit closer, producing a wolfish smile as he lowered his voice.

“Said he could smell ‘something sweet’ on me.”

Hannibal could hear the hitch in Will’s breath. Their noses were a mere inch from touching.

“Holy shit,” Will breathed, cheeks glowing. His soft blue eyes seemed to open up like two wells when the pupils dilated. The realization that Hannibal was carrying his scent – and, more importantly, that someone other than the two of them had noticed – was probably a new and staggering experience for him. But then, Hannibal would be lying if he said he hadn’t been pleased, too. Surprisingly so.

“Ever the poet,” he smirked. “Anyway, he seems to suspect I wouldn’t be going on this trip alone. You probably shouldn’t tell anyone where you were this weekend. People might talk. Thought you should know.”

He heard Will swallow. The omega was heating up.

“Noted,” came the unsteady reply. Hannibal itched to press himself against Will. Let their skin touch. They hadn’t scent marked each other in days. Soon, he’d go back to smelling like himself again. A prospect he rejected completely. He wanted to continue carrying Will’s sweet notes. He wanted people to smell Will on him - even more so, he wanted people to smell *him* on *Will* .

But before he could act on his desires, an embarrassed cough came from behind him. Slowly, he leaned away from Will and glanced over his shoulder. The clerk had returned. She sent Hannibal an abashed smile.

“So sorry to interrupt, sirs. I’ve brought you the tie pins.”

Will cleared his throat and turned away from Hannibal with a flustered scowl. Even the tips of his ears were red. Hannibal couldn’t help but wonder what other parts of Will he could turn that color. Firmly pushing those thoughts aside, he turned back to the clerk and smiled politely.

“Thank you,” he said, taking a couple of steps in her direction to collect the items she’d brought. She cocked her head to the side and seemed to consider something, eyes alight with friendly curiosity.

“We do carry matching couples’ tie pins, if you’re interested?” She smiled. “Alpha and omega, right?”

Will seemed to choke on his own tongue at her suggestion. Hannibal’s sadism took over and he sent the mortified omega a smirk over his shoulder. He carefully arranged his face into an expression of gentlemanly politeness as he turned back to the clerk with a nod.

“Well, it couldn’t hurt to take a look.”

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Pain

Chapter Notes

Note: major revision in progress, march 2024

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was with a sigh of relief that Will stepped into the foyer of the hotel. The weather outside wasn't warm but it was *bright* and it had left him feeling tired and dizzy. He hadn't thought to bring sunglasses – Chicago wasn't exactly a tropical beach resort – and now his eyes ached from the constant squinting against the sunrays, and the bustle of the shopping district they'd just left behind.

Although the atmosphere between him and Hannibal had improved dramatically during their visit to the suit shop, Will's mood had been steadily declining since then, and the headache had been getting worse. Pretending to be fine had, somewhere along the line, turned into an enormous challenge and he didn't think he'd be able to keep the act up for much longer. He wasn't even sure Hannibal was buying it – though he hadn't said anything about it. It was all very ironic, considering Will had just practically ordered Hannibal to tell him what was bothering him a short while ago. The memory of that - and what Hannibal had ended up telling him - still sat heavily in his chest.

Hannibal handled the check-in while Will waited by elevators, tense and tired. As the alpha returned to his side, however, he could feel himself relax slightly. Will gritted his teeth and ignored the spike that was digging into his skull. He wouldn't complain. Would *not* .

After what felt like a small eternity, they reached their floor and Will realized that he'd been holding his breath. He exhaled as quietly as he could. Hannibal stepped out of the elevator and Will followed, rolling his shoulders while the alpha wasn't looking. His muscles ached.

They walked down the corridor until they reached the very end – a corner suite. Hannibal swiped the card to unlock the door and held it open for Will, who took a hesitant step inside and looked around.

"It's cozier than the exterior led me to believe, I'll give you that." Will commented dryly. Hannibal sent him an amused smile as he shrugged his coat off.

The hotel had, in Will's humble opinion, made a rather sinister first impression – the tall building was completely covered in black glass panels, save for the rotating door at the front,

which was encased by a robust stone arch, each side of the entrance adorned with a large Chinese potted pine tree. Above the stone arch resided a large metal plate engraved with *Lynx Hotels* . Five golden stars sat proudly just beneath it.

Will would have thought the dark glass panels on the outside would allow for only a small amount of sunlight to pass through, but he'd been wrong. Unfortunately, the brightness stung Will's eyes and made it difficult to appreciate how it made the room feel airy and tranquil.

The main room contained a pair of armchairs, a spacious sofa, a marble coffee table and a huge plasma screen fastened to the wall. Along the wall farthest from the entrance was a large shelf with various decorative items, as well as a bar desk. The minifridge beneath it was, presumably, fully stocked with various snacks and liquor bottles. Will made a mental note-to-self to investigate that possibility further soon. He could use a drink. Hell, he could use several. The headache was constantly reminding him of its presence, driving the invisible spike in further.

Two doors on the left led to the bedrooms. Will peeked into the one closest to him, furthest from the suite's entrance. The room's interior consisted of a bed, a dark wooden desk and a chair. Dark green satin curtains framed the huge window next to the bed. He imagined the room next to it looked the same.

They'd have to share the bathroom, but Will didn't particularly mind – he was content not having to share a *bed* with the alpha. Was not in any way ready to contemplate what that could possibly lead to.

"I'll take this room, if that's alright with you," Will said, gesturing to the door next to him.

"Of course," Hannibal nodded and rolled his suitcase into the other bedroom, presumably to unpack his suitcase.

Will stepped into the room he'd claimed for himself and hung the garment bag containing his new suit on the coat hanger next to the door. The plastic bag he'd been given by the dry cleaners, containing his books and iPad, was unceremoniously dumped on the floor next to his bed – along with a small H&M bag. After their visit at the suit store, Will pointed out that he needed to buy himself a new set of clothes so that he could change out of the sweatpants and sweatshirt - which they'd discovered, to their mutual dismay, *also* carried hints of sandalwood. It was as if they were being haunted.

Rather than heading back to *Queen Cleaners* , though, Hannibal had suggested utilizing the hotel's laundry service. Currently, the sweatpants and sweatshirt were wrapped up tightly in a *third* plastic bag, which Will placed at the foot of his bed. Will made a mental note to call the reception about that later, but he was grateful that this time, none of the sandalwood came through. And the new jacket, t-shirt and slacks he was wearing smelled of nothing in particular. He'd hoped his headache would ease up thanks to that - but it hadn't, yet.

Unable to resist his curiosity, Will walked over to Hannibal's room and peeked inside to watch the man unpack. Fascinating procedure. Will had basically only thought to bring books, deodorant and a couple of spare shirts, whereas Hannibal appeared to have thought of

everything . Pressed shirts, pants, a vest, several neck-ties, a black comb, hair gel, shower gel, shaving cream, aftershave and cologne were soon laid out on the bed, followed by a laptop and a charger.

“You’re a bit high maintenance, aren’t you?” Will observed, sending a tired smirk Hannibal’s way. The alpha straightened up and raised an eyebrow at him.

“I prefer to think of myself as well-prepared,” he retorted with a good-natured smile and pulled out a large black garment bag, presumably containing the suit he was planning to wear for the evening.

Will regarded the items currently taking up the space of Hannibal’s bed and realized that he hadn’t brought anything that might help him look more representable for the evening. Recalling the looks he’d been receiving while still wearing his comfortable but unbelievable inelegant travel outfit, he now wished he had. If not for his own sake, then for Hannibal’s. Will was supposed to be his partner, after all. They were meant to complement one another. The suit he was going to wear was nice, yes, but would it be enough? Would it fool anyone?

Anxiety made itself known in the pit of his stomach, worsening his mood.

When the hell did I start taking this so seriously?

The headache made its presence known once more, the imaginary spike driving further into his skull, and he gritted his teeth to hide his pained wince.

“How many hours before we have to be ready?”

Hannibal glanced down at his wrist watch.

“Three at the most. It starts at seven.”

“Alright,” Will mumbled and headed into his own room. “I’m going to lie down for a minute.”

“Are you alright?” Hannibal asked from somewhere behind him.

“Yeah. Just tired.”

The sheets felt wonderfully cool against his cheek as he buried his head in one of the pillows and closed his eyes. The room was brighter than he would’ve liked, especially with the headache rapidly increasing in intensity, but he was too drained to get up and pull the curtains. Thankfully, however, his fatigue trumped the pain and he found himself drifting into a state of relaxation faster than he thought he would. Soon, he was asleep.

Hannibal was almost certain that Will was, in fact, not ‘just tired’, but since the omega

insisted on keeping up the façade, Hannibal wouldn't press him for the truth. At least not now. Will clearly needed sleep – actually, Hannibal was fairly sure that Will's sleep deprivation had reached a level where the man would need to be unconscious for a full year to make up for it – and it'd give Hannibal the chance to unpack, relax and reflect.

He turned back to his suitcase and unzipped the inner pocket, and pulled out a small jar of painkillers. Stronger and far more effective than whatever over-the-counter stuff he presumed that Will usually turned to. It was a decision Hannibal was glad to have made – Will's complexion, though it'd been rather pale to begin with, had been teetering on greenish during their earlier cab ride. And he'd been complaining about a headache…

Not that he hoped they'd actually come in handy – the pills had a sedative effect and might put a damper on the whole evening – but Hannibal did like to think of himself as well-prepared. Providing for his omega was a given, especially since the omega in question appeared to lack any talent for planning ahead, and he didn't like seeing Will in pain.

Well aware that Will would be too proud to interpret the gesture as anything other than coddling or downright condescending, however, Hannibal tucked the jar of pills back into his suitcase, content in knowing he hadn't forgotten to pack them. Should Will recover from his headache on his own, he'd never even know that Hannibal had brought them.

Hannibal walked out into the main room and glanced towards the closed door that led to Will's room. A sting of regret made itself known in his chest, their earlier confrontation still weighing heavily on his mind. Aside from the fact that Will appeared to have intuitively picked up on Hannibal's dismay, there was the added issue of having caused the omega such distress over it. It hadn't been Hannibal's intention, of course, but still. It was a failure.

For all the years he'd spent studying omegas, reading practically everything there was to read on the subject, and having treated dozens of omega patients – which had granted him a keen understanding of how omegas tended to respond to words and actions – Hannibal hadn't been able to foresee how being in a courtship with one would affect *him* . It was frustratingly destabilizing.

"Don't worry. I won't lose control. Never have-"

"Never will. Right."

Will trusted Hannibal to stay in control – for the both of them. Hannibal had never doubted that he'd be able to – until now.

He would have to do better. Tighten the grip.

To that end, he decided to make himself a cup of tea.

He woke up tingling. Or perhaps it was more of an itching sensation? Will couldn't quite tell

– all he knew was that it was uncomfortable. The room was still obnoxiously bright and the temperature appeared to have risen during his nap. Groggy and disoriented – feeling as though his brain had swollen to twice its normal size inside his skull – Will got out of bed and headed for the door on wobbly legs.

“Is there water?” He asked as he stumbled out into the main room, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

Will found Hannibal lounging on the sofa watching a news cast – clad in a bathing robe. The man’s hair was wet and slicked back, indicating that he’d just taken a shower. Will suddenly became aware of the lingering scent of expensive shower cream in the air. Hannibal turned to look at him, expression tightening a fraction when his gaze met Will’s. The alpha stood and headed for the bar desk, opening the minifridge. He took out a bottle of water from it and walked over to Will.

“You look tired,” he commented, handing the bottle over. Will gave a slow nod as he unscrewed the cork.

“Common side effect of having just woken up,” Will pointed out after taking a swig of the water, raking a hand through his hair with his free hand. “I’ll be fine in a minute.”

Hannibal regarded him quietly for a moment, eyes narrowing – almost in a scrutinizing manner. It made Will’s skin crawl, so he turned away from the man with a small cough.

“I see you already took a shower?” Will said, trying – and probably failing – to act normal. The smile he produced felt stiff even to him. “Guess I should take one, too. What time is it?”

“Half past five.” Hannibal gave him an unconvinced look. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Will raised an eyebrow at him and gritted his teeth as a spark of irritation ignited in him.

“You don't believe me?”

Not a second later, however, a sharp twinge of pain pierced through his skull. It came so suddenly that Will reacted instinctively by bringing a hand up to press against his temple, hissing against the pain. Flashes of harsh light danced across his closed eyelids.

“Evidently, your definition of ‘alright’ differs from mine,” Hannibal said calmly, though Will could tell the alpha was displeased. “Your headache persists.”

“… Yeah,” Will eventually admitted, massaging his scalp with his fingertips. He didn’t miss the sigh that escaped the other man and immediately tensed up at the sound.

“I wish you didn’t feel the need to hide it from me.”

Will glared at the floor. He held the water bottle’s neck between two fingers, letting it dangle from his hand.

“For God’s sake,” he muttered. “It’s just a headache, Hannibal. It’ll pass.”

There was more to it, of course – not that Will was about to start gushing.

“You complained about your headache hours ago,” Hannibal pointed out. “I would argue that’s cause for concern.”

Defensive anger flared up in Will. That goddamned reprimanding tone.

“And *I* would argue that you don’t have to berate me like a child,” he snapped, with far more heat than he intended. “I’ve told you it’s not a big deal. I’m just going to take a shower, and it’ll pass. That alright with you?” He glared up at the taller man.

“Entirely” Hannibal replied, maintaining his calm – like always – and Will wanted to punch him. “Though I’d like to be clear that if the pain doesn’t subside within the hour, we should-”

“We should what? Stay in? Cuddle up on the couch?” Will snarled, heart pounding heavily in his chest for reasons he couldn’t even comprehend. “No, that’s great. I’ve fucked this entire day up, you just spent fifteen hundred dollars on a new suit for me, and you think on top of all that, I’m going to cancel because of a headache? Good to know you have that little faith in me.”

Will knew he was being unfair. Completely unreasonable. Cruel, even. He just couldn’t seem to stop himself. He’d been working so hard to keep his suffering hidden earlier, but his energy sources were depleted. There was nothing to hold him back now. Hannibal said nothing, though there was obvious tension around his eyes. Will turned away from him with an angry scoff and headed for the bathroom, which still carried the heady scent of alpha, slamming the door shut behind him.

Hot, peppery anger knocked around in his chest as he locked the door and started undressing himself. His breathing came fast. On some level, Will understood that he’d gone overboard. He understood that there was no real reason for him to be this upset with Hannibal. The man had hardly done anything to deserve it. And yet, part of him wanted to *stay* angry. He didn’t *want* Hannibal to fix it. He didn’t *want* to be comforted.

Will wasn’t sure what he wanted.

Few things in life confused Will as much as the notion of desperately wanting to pull Hannibal close, while simultaneously wanting to shove the man away. Claw at him, kick him and scream at him. Cling to him, breathe him in, taste the skin of his nape.

These contradicting desires resulted in a new kind of frustration that was downright frightening in its intensity. His hands trembled as he washed himself, using the mild shower cream that the hotel had supplied them with. The lukewarm water stung against his skin, and for a brief moment of clarity, Will wondered if maybe he was falling seriously ill. Maybe something was actually *wrong* with him?

He stepped out to dry himself off. The towel – soft cotton terry – dragged painfully across his

face. Will gritted his teeth and continued drying himself off, even though the towel felt like little razors against his skin. Will bit back the angry sob that threatened to leave him.

He wrapped himself up in a bathrobe and, with his hair still dripping and eyes stinging, left the bathroom. A cloud of steam followed him outside, where he found Hannibal waiting for him, still clad in his bathrobe, offering glimpses of skin that Will hadn't seen before. Distracting. Attractive. *Infuriating* .

"What?" Will snapped. "Afraid I'll slip and hurt myself if you let me out of your sight?"

"No," Hannibal said, voice steely. He maintained his distance and retrieved something out of his pocket. When he held his hand out, Will was startled to see a little white pill resting in his palm. "But I can clearly see that you're pain, and this will probably be-"

"You've gotta be kidding," he let out a tired, scornful huff that was meant to be a laugh, though his throat snared up at the sight of Hannibal's tight expression. "I didn't realize I was such a handful. I mean, if we're bringing *drugs* into this-" His voice broke. The spike in his head went in deeper, making his vision swim, and he brought a hand up to press it against his forehead, scrunching his eyes shut with a hiss.

"Will."

"No! Just… no." Will backed up a step, blindly holding a hand out to keep the alpha away. His head hurt so bad he thought he might throw up. Nausea made itself known in the back of his throat. "I feel sick… Something's wrong."

"Will, calm down-"

"You think I'm not *trying* !" Will snapped his head up to stare angrily at the alpha, eyes stinging from the flashes of pain inside his skull. "I *can't* . Everything *hurts* ."

Hannibal regarded him quietly for a moment, eyes widening ever so slightly, as if something had just dawned on him. It didn't help Will calm down in the slightest.

"Will, come here."

Hannibal took a slow step towards him. Will immediately tensed up.

"What are you doing?" Will heard the note of fear in his own voice and immediately tried covering it up by narrowing his eyes at the man, though he found himself unable to move as the alpha approached. With each step Hannibal took, something nudged at Will. Something that promised he'd find relief. It was petrifying.

"Something I've been neglecting."

Will felt his pulse speed up. Whether it was from fear or excitement or anger, he didn't know. The confusing clash of emotions made him want to run, but instead, he found himself taking a step *forward* . Hannibal placed himself right in front of him. Will couldn't bring himself to

look away. Frantically, he tried to think of something to say, but couldn't. He just knew he wanted something. Intense, frustrated longing scratched him raw from the inside.

Hannibal placed firm hands on Will's upper arms and held him in place, and Will didn't shake him off. He was practically frozen in place as the alpha leaned down slightly, inclining his head. Will heard his own rapid pulse in his ears as he shut his eyes and tilted his head.

When Hannibal's cheek made contact with his own, Will's breath caught in his throat. The alpha was warm against him, though. It was comforting. Unbelievably comforting. Strong fingers suddenly sneaked around his waist to pull him closer and Will sucked in a startled gasp of air. Hannibal's scent filled him up in an instant. It felt like he had been trapped in a room with no oxygen, and Hannibal was a gush of crisp winter air. Without really thinking, Will reached up and grasped at Hannibal's robe, tentatively pulling the man closer, and pressed his nose shamelessly against the alpha's jugular, just beneath his jaw.

The spike that had been driving into his skull thinned and disappeared, leaving his head feeling light and hazy. For a moment, that was all Will could feel: the *absence* of pain.

His skin warmed up. One of the hands on his waist traveled up, fingers trailing his spine, and Will trembled against the sensation. A relieved sigh escaped him and he couldn't help but to press himself closer, deeper. He brought an arm up around Hannibal's neck, fingers curling possessively around Hannibal's shoulder to let the man know that he wasn't allowed to retreat.

Not yet. Not *yet* . More.

He heard Hannibal's deep inhale against his neck and shivered when the alpha sighed against his skin. His breath was warm. The alpha's hands grasped tightly around his hips as he maneuvered them towards the wall, where he pressed up closer against Will, forcing a quiet whimper out of him. Had Will been more *aware* , if his head hadn't been so scrambled, he might have recoiled in embarrassment. But instead, he brought a second arm up around Hannibal's neck, keeping the alpha close. Arousal simmered in his gut, but it was subdued – a whisper of something that wouldn't take hold until later.

Everything inside of him loosened up. The anxiety in his chest dissipated. The anger drained out of him and was reduced to a faint, distant memory. Hannibal's hands flattened out and dragged soothingly up and down his sides, and all Will could think to do was to savor it.

Several minutes passed. Several minutes of silence, and breathing, and feeling.

And then Hannibal started to slowly retreat. Will didn't want him to. Struggling to catch his breath, hands still clutching onto the fabric of Hannibal's robe, Will looked up at the alpha.

"How are you feeling?" Hannibal's voice came out low and rough as he searched Will's eyes, a wrinkle appearing between his brows.

Will, who was slowly coming back to his senses and thereby regaining his ability to think logically, stared back at the alpha in dumb-struck silence while his brain worked furiously to

connect all the dots. Something *had* been wrong. Something *must* have been wrong.

He sorted through the memories of the day in rapid succession. The headache, the immense fatigue and the irrational bursts of anger… The fact that this was the first time that they'd scent marked each other in several days – and it had made all of Will's aches and frustrations go away in a matter of seconds.

The sudden - unwelcome - episodes of sexual arousal he'd been experiencing...

Realization hit him like a punch to his gut.

"Preheat," he breathed the word like it was a terminal illness and closed his eyes in agony. "No, no, no…"

Hannibal's hand pressed softly against his nape, before shifting over to his shoulder where it remained, giving a squeeze that was probably meant to be comforting, but instead made Will feel small and vulnerable. The worst part was that it made him want to seek comfort from Hannibal even more.

"It's alright, Will."

No, it really wasn't. Struggling to keep his breathing even, Will directed his gaze to the floor. Hannibal's slippers. The dark wood. The beige carpet.

Will wasn't dumb. He knew this was bound to happen eventually. And he supposed he should have recognised it. But over the years that had passed since the last time he was forced to endure this, Will had forgotten just how *needy* it made him. How it robbed him of his self-control. Will Graham, former homicide detective, expert profiler, FBI consultant, seeking out the warmth and scent of an alpha just to stay sane. Make the pain stop. Calm down.

Granted, the symptoms weren't normally this severe. He was clear-headed enough to understand that this was yet another side-effect of having relied on suppressants for too long. The next preheat would likely be less brutal, he'd be less aggressive, less confused. But that didn't matter. Because he was forced to endure this *now* , for the first time in over a decade, while he was stuck in Chicago. Far, far away from Wolf Trap, his dogs, his house. There was nowhere for him to hide away, nowhere to go. And even though he wanted to run, he couldn't leave Hannibal. The very thought made his innards cramp up in distress. Because as much as it appalled him, he needed Hannibal. Needed him to-

" *Will* ."

Hannibal's voice was firm and a little louder than before, and Will snapped his chin up to look at him, slightly startled. He realized that the alpha had been trying to get his attention. Coffee brown eyes stared into his own, pupils dilating rapidly, and Will swallowed. Wanting nothing more than to hide his face in Hannibal's chest and continue breathing in that scent, wanting it so bad that he could've cried, Will turned away. He gave a gentle shrug to get Hannibal's hand off his shoulder – a loss that nearly caused him physical pain – and cleared his throat. His voice still came out rough.

“I should get dressed.”

Removing himself from Hannibal made every cell in his body scream at him. It felt wrong. It felt cold and dizzying and painful. And still, Will managed. Quietly, he slipped into his own room, closing the door behind him.

Will disrobed himself slowly, skin throbbing. Thoughts swirled around in his head, pulse speeding up ever so slightly. It made dressing himself a difficult and confusing procedure. He kept buttoning his shirt wrong. His fingers shook while he digested what had just taken place.

One, he was in preheat. That meant his actual heat was likely only a few weeks away. An inevitable event that he would’ve preferred *not* to be reminded of, especially not like this.

Two, Hannibal had very successfully managed to calm him down and subdue his preheat symptoms with his mere presence and gentle touches. And Will understood what that meant. He’d been a proper little scholar ever since Hannibal made him promise to read that damned book.

They were becoming attuned to one another – Will felt safe with Hannibal, not just at an intellectual level, but at an *instinctual* one as well.

Above all, it meant that their faux courtship was gradually developing into something… a little less faux.

And damn if that didn’t scare the living hell out of him.

Hannibal’s gaze followed Will as the omega distanced himself and retired to his room. The closed door felt like a slap to the face. Triggered instincts deep within Hannibal – instincts that told him to walk up to that door, open it, grab the omega and press their bodies together whether the man wanted it or not. Except that was just it. Will didn’t want it.

Hannibal knew Will Graham well enough at this point to understand that the man was, yet again, holding himself back. While the omega had been making *some* tentative progress in coming to terms with his gender – though not exactly any enormous strides – this was just the kind of thing that might knock Will down, push him back to square one. Will hated depending on others, and that was exactly what the preheat was forcing him to do. It was bound to make the man uncomfortable.

During an active heat, unmated omegas cared very little about who they ended up mating with – so long as they *had* someone to mate with. That blind desperation was very much the cause for various bigoted opinions regarding their gender, as well as a source of shame and self-loathing for many omegas. A physiological curse, one might say.

Preheat served an entirely different purpose, however, and arguably one that was perhaps meant to counterbalance the intense, uncontrollable urgency that came later. Because unlike heat, it wasn't the fervent desire to mate, but rather an intense longing for reassurance and closeness – one might say, it was the pursuit of a *suitable* partner, rather than 'just anyone'.

And Will had just allowed himself, rather keenly, to be comforted by Hannibal. But Hannibal had witnessed the moment Will understood what was going on. Watched the dread darken his expression, before he ultimately retreated.

It frustrated Hannibal that the timing was so poor. The trip to Chicago was, after all, meant to have a *positive* impact on the omega. Hannibal had meant for it to not only give Will some time away from his reclusive lifestyle in Wolf Trap, but to also give the man some much needed insight.

They'd been in Chicago for less than a day, and so far, nothing had gone as planned. Hannibal didn't like it when things didn't go as planned. There had been something off about Will all day – a slight difference in both his scent and demeanor – and Hannibal concluded that he should have foreseen this. It frustrated him that he hadn't. But then, the sickening smell of sandalwood followed them all the way to the hotel and disrupted the omega's scent. It wasn't until Will got out of the shower that Hannibal realized what was going on.

Calming the omega had been immensely gratifying. Will was responding well to him. Eagerly, even – though it wasn't necessarily *willingly* . But of course, Will clung to his self-control. And Hannibal couldn't really blame him for it - he had his own urges to restrain. Right now, providing the omega he was courting with comfort and reassurance was one such urge. But unless Will expressed a desire for Hannibal's closeness, he'd have to keep a respectful distance.

The omega needed time and space to come to terms with certain aspects of his biology. And although Hannibal ached to make things easier for Will, there was, for the moment, absolutely nothing he could do. Except wait. Have patience.

Hannibal dressed himself with care. There was no rush. Not yet anyway. And if Will needed more time, Hannibal would come to terms with it. It would make them late, of course, but Hannibal would much rather show up late with a contented Will on his arm, than getting there on time – either alone, or with an omega who couldn't even bear to look at him.

For this occasion, Hannibal was wearing a dark gray three-piece suit, tailored perfection. The button-up he'd chosen was a soft lavender, and the necktie a dark marine blue. It occurred to him, as he wrapped the silk around his neck, that he and Will – whose new suit was a dark navy – would be matching each other nicely.

It wasn't until he was in the process of fastening his cufflinks, standing in front of a large mirror in the hallway, that the door that led to Will's room opened behind him and the omega appeared. Hannibal gave him a quick, idle glance and then proceeded to fix his sleeves. Will's gaze did not meet his. Instead, the omega appeared vastly interested in the floor, staring at it with a mild frown. Hannibal wasn't going to press the man for conversation. Will was evidently still intending to go to the vernissage – he'd gotten dressed after all – which

was a relief. Should Will have chosen to back out, despite what he'd said earlier, Hannibal wouldn't have tried to change his mind.

"My hair."

Will spoke so suddenly and so quietly that Hannibal almost missed it. He turned to look at the younger man, whose gaze remained averted.

"Your hair?"

"It's a mess. I'll look like an idiot next to you." Will crossed his arms over his chest, looking all kinds of uncomfortable. "And I didn't bring any products with me."

At first glance, it might have appeared as though Will was legitimately asking because he didn't have any other choice. But the way Will's expression softened around the edges, the hint of guilt in that frown, led Hannibal to understand that the omega felt remorse for having rejected him earlier and that he was trying to make up for it now. Well, that was heartening.

"I see." Hannibal stepped into his room and retrieved a comb and small jar of hair gel from his suitcase, before he re-joined Will in the main room and held the items out for him. The omega didn't take them. Instead, he looked up at Hannibal, finally meeting his gaze, with eyes that were stormy and vulnerable. The man seemed to hesitate for a few moments before he finally spoke.

"Can you do it for me?"

Hannibal blinked slowly, savoring the warmth that settled in his chest without his permission. A clever, deliberate move on Will's part. It was such a small thing, such an easy task, but its effects were felt. Will was letting himself rely on Hannibal – not just for his own sake, but likely for Hannibal's as well.

"Of course."

Hannibal beckoned Will over the mirror before he raised the comb to the top of Will's head and started working on the omega's unruly mop of brown curls. Will stood absolutely still while Hannibal worked, as if he was holding his breath. That wouldn't do.

Subtly, as if he was simply maneuvering his way around Will's still form, he brushed his hand down Will's back, letting it rest just below the soft curve of the spine. The muscles in Will's throat contracted as the man swallowed, the ridge of his cheekbones reddening slightly. Content with the response, Hannibal removed his hand and continued with his task, catching Will's gaze in the mirror.

"How are you feeling?"

Will took his time working up a response.

"Better. Nervous. Mortified. Take your pick." A spark of humor lit up in those blue eyes and

Hannibal found himself smiling.

“And the headache?”

“Gone.”

Hannibal nodded quietly and took a step back, pleased with what he’d accomplished. Will’s natural curls were now tamed by hair gel and swept back, away from Will’s forehead, in an elegant side-part. Will turned back to the mirror to inspect his appearance.

“Looks great,” he said, sending Hannibal a grateful look. “Thank you.”

“Happy to help.” Hannibal smiled gently at him and glanced at his wrist watch. “We should get going. But first…”

He turned away from the omega and collected a small black box from the coffee table. Will’s face lit up with amused recognition and he released a huff of laughter.

“Christ, really?”

“They’ve been paid for,” Hannibal stated and opened the box. “It would be wasteful not to use them.”

Hannibal took a step closer to Will and got one of the tie pins out. The design was simple and sharp, a silver pin with an engraved symbol in the middle. Upon closer inspection, one would see that the symbol was in fact an intricate combination of the **α** and **Ω** letters, symbolizing the unity of their genders. Hannibal fastened it in Will’s black tie and smoothed the fabric out, before he took it upon himself to adjust the knot sitting beneath Will’s collar. It was an act of affection and possessiveness, and Will allowed it, even tipping his head back slightly to give Hannibal more room. Keeping himself from running a finger along Will’s throat was… difficult.

Once he was done, Hannibal took out his own pin, identical to Will’s. Under normal circumstances, Hannibal didn’t think he’d ever buy such sentimental items for himself and a partner. But when Will looked down at his decorated tie with a fond, barely-there smile, Hannibal found that he didn’t regret the purchase. He fastened his own tie pin and gestured towards the door.

“Shall we?”

“Hannibal.”

The tone of Will’s voice was serious and low, matching the expression on his face. For a moment, Hannibal worried that Will was about to change his mind at the last second, but instead the omega walked up to him and reached out his hand to gently brush his fingers against Hannibal's.

“I said some pretty harsh things before, back when I…” He trailed off and cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said. I was just…”

Hannibal took Will’s hand in his own and brought it to his lips to press a soft kiss to the knuckles. Will’s breath stuttered, and Hannibal pretended not to notice.

“I know.”

They regarded each other for a few seconds, searching each other’s gazes, and seemed to reach a silent agreement: nothing more needed to be said. At least not right now.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Vernissage

Chapter Notes

Note: major revision in progress, March 2024

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will glanced at his reflection in the mirrored wall of the elevator. He barely recognized himself. While he'd never really given a damn about his appearance, he had to admit there was something refreshing and encouraging about the way he looked now. The suit jacket made his shoulders appear straighter, and the curls that normally covered his forehead – giving him a somewhat boyish look – were gelled and combed back. He looked put-together and confident – even if it didn't match the way he felt – and for that, he was grateful. Because the alpha that stood next to him looked so sharp, so sophisticated and so devastatingly handsome in his gray suit that Will felt a rush of warmth in his gut every time their eyes met.

Still, immense guilt and embarrassment simmered in his veins. As if it wasn't enough that he'd turned the whole day into a disaster; he'd just thrown a completely irrational tantrum in their hotel room, said things to Hannibal things that the alpha definitely did not deserve, and ultimately relented to the humiliating fact that it was all because his body was trying to prepare him for his heat.

All of this should've made Will want to curl up under his blanket and hide, but he'd meant what he said before - though he hadn't intended for it to come out so harshly. Hannibal had put up with him and his trail of disasters all day, without even so much as blaming Will for everything that had gone wrong, and Will was *not* going to back out. Accompanying Hannibal for the evening was the least he could do. And if Will had to be completely honest with himself, it wasn't just for Hannibal's benefit. The thought of spending time away from the alpha left him with a vague sense of anxiety that he wasn't willing to explore further - especially when he was so far away from home and everything that felt safe and familiar to him.

Still weighed down by the tension he'd caused earlier, despite the tender moment they'd shared just before heading out, Will wanted to make sure nothing more went wrong that evening. So when he spoke, he made the conscious effort to sound calm and unbothered.

"Is this going to be one of those 'use the wrong fork and you'll be banished from this establishment' situations? Elderly ladies clutching their pearls while the waiters exchange subtle glances of disapproval?" Will said, idly putting his hands behind his back as he glanced over to his partner, humor dancing in his eyes. "You should know I've been known to use plastic sporks whenever I can't be bothered to do the dishes."

Hannibal didn't look at him, opting instead to fix his already impeccable sleeves, but Will noticed the way the man's lips curved into an amused smirk.

"It's a vernissage, Will. Not a nineteenth century dinner party."

"So that's a no?"

"Indeed. You can expect refreshments in the form of wine and various finger foods."

"Mini-burgers?"

"That, I'm afraid, would be bordering on blasphemous." Hannibal sent him a raised eyebrow. "This is still a five-star hotel."

Will shook his head softly as he looked away, smile lingering on his face, mustering the strength to say what he needed to say next.

"Got it. And you'll stay with me, right? I mean," he cleared his throat, and tried for a more casual tone, "you won't leave me to fend for myself, will you? Because I'm telling you, I know virtually nothing about art. They're all going to hate me."

He added a breathy laugh there, but the slight tremble in his voice gave him away. He was nervous. Will could feel Hannibal's gaze on him, though he stared straight ahead at the closed doors, trying his best to look relaxed. There was nothing he could do about the preheat situation, except come to terms with it and wait it out. So long as Hannibal stayed close, his symptoms would remain subdued and no one would know.

Ironic, really, that the notion of staying by Hannibal's side to ensure his own safety had left him feeling so upset just a few days prior, and now he was making that very same demand.

"I'll stay with you," Hannibal said calmly.

Reassured by this, Will nodded and exhaled the tight breath he'd been holding. He straightened his shoulders in an attempt to rid himself of some of his nerves, when the elevator came to a stop with a 'ding' and the doors opened.

In the lobby, a rather large group of people were already waiting to be let into the dining hall, which was the venue for the evening. Several of them were couples, as far as Will could tell – subtle hints all around, various public displays of affection, hands curled possessively around waists – and he averted his gaze to the floor, suddenly acutely aware of the fact that he and Hannibal would likely be perceived as a couple, too. He wasn't sure how to feel about that, but when Hannibal's hand pressed softly against his back – briefly, just a brush of fingertips to escort Will through the crowd – he couldn't deny the sense of comfort it brought him, just having the alpha close. Admittedly, Will's brain was still jacked up on preheat hormones, which he was sure contributed to the sudden wave of affection that crashed over him when he looked up at the taller man – but still.

To Will's relief, the doors to the dining hall opened before he was forced to mingle with any of the other guests. Soft jazz emitted from the large room, breaking the murmur of voices. Though, when Will cared to really listen, he realized that the jazz had been remixed with a kind of electronic beat that he was almost positive that Hannibal would disapprove of. He glanced up to the alpha at his side and stifled an amused grin when he saw the irritated wrinkle between the man's eyebrows. When Hannibal took note of him, his features immediately smoothed out. His eyes were warm as they met Will's.

"Let's go."

Will took a steadying breath and raised his chin, which he hoped would make him look more comfortable and confident, despite the dread cramping in his gut. Hannibal guided him into the dining hall, which was rather dimly lit – but Will quickly understood the reason for the lack of light.

The artworks decorating the walls were all incorporated with LED lights in muted pastel colors, shedding a soft, colorful glow over the three-dimensional pieces – as well as casting interesting shadows. Pieces of tree branches, lacquered leaves, stones and dried flowers had been used to bring the artwork to the next level. Arranged to resemble faces, fields, night skies. In addition to the pieces hanging on the walls, there were also installations consisting of clay sculptures, lightbulbs and cords sitting in the middle of the floor.

Will looked around, equal parts astounded and bemused. He'd never been very interested in art, but he could see now why others were. The artwork, albeit confusing, was rather striking.

Although the dinner tables and chairs had been cleared away for the evening, there were several smaller round tables strategically placed throughout the room, not too close to the artworks, but closer to the walls than the center, allowing for the visitors to move around freely and without hindrance. Only one long table had been left in the room, placed in front of the bar. It was filled with large plates of food, water carafes, glasses and napkins. Next to the table stood a group of waiters, equipped with large silver trays. On top of them rested filled wine glasses. As the guests moved further into the room, the waiters started making their rounds. Soon, everyone had been offered refreshments – including Hannibal and Will. Hannibal politely declined, whereas Will gratefully accepted a glass of white wine. He needed the extra courage.

He took a sip from his glass and turned his attention to the other guests. The murmur of voices filtering through the music made him feel as though he was trapped in a beehive. They'd only been there for a couple of minutes, and Will was already feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sheer number of strangers he had to share the space with. Under professional circumstances, he could manage situations where being surrounded by other people was unavoidable. But this was a *social* event, and he knew that it was only a matter of time before-

"Dr Lecter! Wonderful to see you!"

-something like *this* would happen.

Will groaned internally before he turned to look at the elderly man extending his hand to Hannibal, who took it and gave it a firm shake. The man was shorter than Hannibal, and his hairline was receding, but he still carried himself with impeccably straight shoulders and chin raised proudly.

Alpha , Will's nose informed him, and he immediately tensed up as the man turned to smile at him. It was a friendly smile – not at all predatory or threatening – and Will cursed the instincts that insisted he back away from the older man. Hannibal took a subtle step closer to him – suggesting he'd sensed the distress somehow – and effectively eased the tension in Will's muscles with his mere presence. It irked Will more than he cared to admit.

"Likewise, Mr Lucas," Hannibal said, voice warm and steady. "Allow me to introduce William Graham. He works as a forensic profiler in Baltimore."

"I see," Mr Lucas' eyes lit up with curiosity. "How fascinating. I've always found it astonishing how you can identify criminals by looking at the smallest of details. My wife worked with the police for many years and used to tell me such incredible tales."

Mated, then . That made Will relax even more. So much so that he managed to crack a somewhat genuine smile and meet the man's gaze.

"Looking at the small details takes a bit of patience, admittedly, but most of the times my job is very rewarding," he said and had to make a very conscious effort to not let his mind stray to everything that was going on in Baltimore at that moment, aware that it would only sour his mood. "It's good to take a break from it once in a while, though," he continued and glanced at Hannibal, just to get some sort of hint of how the other man thought he was handling the situation. He'd never been socially gifted, after all, and needed the reassurance. Hannibal appeared content with his performance, his expression settled in a sort of polite half-smile. Encouraged, Will turned back to Mr Lucas. "What do you do for a living?"

The older alpha barked a short laugh and gestured to their surroundings.

"This," he explained, voice full of pride, "is my hotel. Though I retired from my post as hotel manager two years ago, I'm still chairman of the board and try to stay as involved as I can." Mr Lucas gave Hannibal a pleased look. "I was honestly quite thrilled to hear you were planning to visit after all these years, it's been far too long."

"Indeed it has," Hannibal agreed with a smile. "I shall have to make amends and visit more often."

"You really should. How are you enjoying your stay so far? Well, I hope?" Mr Lucas suddenly turned to Will as he said this, clearly hoping to get some input.

"Oh, uh. Yes, very." Will cleared his throat and tried once more. "Well. Very well." Why were words sometimes so difficult to find? "And this art is certainly… interesting."

"High praise," the elderly alpha chuckled, placing his hands behind his back. "I'm glad to hear it. Miss Bright has been gaining attention over the last couple of years. Of course, I can't

be unbiased when it comes to her work. She's my niece, you see." He winked playfully at Will, who managed a polite nod in return.

An elderly woman – beta – suddenly walked up to Mr Lucas, slipping her petite hand into the nook of his arm and gave Will a friendly, but reserved look. Clearly, they had now been joined by *Mrs* lucas.

"Darling, I've been looking all over for you," She said, gaze wandering over to Hannibal. Her face lit up with pleased recognition. "Doctor Lecter? My goodness, it's been ages!" She gave her husband a playfully reprimanding look. "Did you know he'd be attending? You should have *told* me!"

"It slipped my mind," Mr Lucas said, smiling warmly to his wife as he placed his hand over hers. She turned to Will again, still with a hint of calculating apprehension in her eyes, as though she was afraid Will might try and grab Mr Lucas for himself. Will became uncomfortably aware of the fact that she saw him as a threat – which was entirely unprecedented, at least outside of his work.

"And who might this be?" She asked, her voice carrying a subtle yet entirely noticeable edge. Will looked up and extended a hand towards her, trying to appear as unthreatening as he could.

"Will Graham, ma'am. Pleasure to meet you."

Mrs Lucas regarded his hand for a second before slowly taking it in her own, eyes narrowing slightly as she shook. Mr Lucas gave a low chuckle, evidently finding his wife's behavior endearing. Will disagreed.

"Mr Graham is here with Dr Lecter, dear." The tone of his voice was disarming and reassuring and when she turned to look at him, he gave her a pointed look. She turned back to look at Will, embarrassed surprise coloring her cheeks. Her gaze darted back and forth between Will and Hannibal, eyes widening in realization.

"Oh," she said eventually, "oh!" A somewhat relieved smile broke out on her face. "Oh, but that's simply marvelous!" She sent Hannibal a look. "I was under the impression that you weren't looking for a mate, Dr Lecter."

Will sucked in a startled breath and turned his gaze away from the group, pretending to suddenly be extremely interested in the artistic display of car tyres a few feet away, while Hannibal's hand pressed against the curve of his back and stroked up, towards Will's shoulder blades, before it traveled back down at settled at Will's waist. It was a possessive and protective move and something only a courting alpha would ever do to an omega. Will knew that, and hell – he'd been expecting this. Still, it was as though everything around them slowed down and Will glanced at Hannibal, trying to deduce whether the alpha was actively *trying* to make him unsteady. He drank more greedily from his glass.

"I wasn't, until just recently," Hannibal explained. Will tried not to dwell on just what the hell *that* meant. "Will works as a profiler for the FBI." Conveniently leaving out the part where

Will was suspended for being mentally unstable, Hannibal continued. “We met through his work, actually.”

“Oh?” Mrs Lucas smiled – a much more genuine expression now than it had been before – when she turned to look at Will. “I’ve worked with the FBI once or twice in my day as well,” she said. “Though I wasn’t a profiler.”

“What were your duties, ma’am?” Will asked politely, still hyper-aware of Hannibal’s hand against him. His muscles ached from the restraint it took to not squirm under the touch. Not because it was unpleasant, but rather the opposite.

“Administrative work, mostly,” she replied, waving her hand dismissively. “Not nearly as exciting as what you do, I’m sure, but still rather interesting.”

“I’m sure that it was,” Will offered.

Mrs Lucas cocked her head to the side, eyes squinting in curious contemplation.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what’s it like to be working consistently with the FBI? It’s quite rare for omegas to enter that line of work, no?”

Will had, on a number of occasions, tried to envision what it would be like – having someone comment on his gender, knowing it was bound to come up eventually. He’d practiced possible responses, ranging from polite to quippy, as well as nonchalant shrugs in his mirror. It had seemed ridiculous at the time, of course, but also necessary. He needed to be prepared, and before this, he’d thought that he was.

But Mrs Lucas’ question, innocent as it was, still came as a sucker punch. The air locked in Will’s throat and for a few seconds – which felt like hours to him – he could only stare at her.

It wasn’t that Will had been stupidly unaware that they’d be perceiving him as an omega. That was, after all, what this whole damned trip was about in the first place. But the blatant way she put it out there, said the actual *word* , like it wasn’t a big deal, like it wasn’t something that Will had spent his entire adult life trying to conceal from everyone around him, had a rather startling effect on him.

All of a sudden, it felt like all eyes turned to him. And he was naked. Purely omega, unhidden, out in the open. Fresh prey. Asking for it.

He was vaguely aware of Hannibal speaking next to him. Not *to* him, apparently, but that was just as well. The floor had, at some point, started undulating beneath his feet and Will tried taking a step back, but ended up stumbling slightly. Hannibal’s hand pressed firmer against his back, and Will, now unable to do anything other than follow his instincts, leaned in closer against the alpha. Though he couldn’t understand what, exactly, Hannibal was saying, the calm tone of his voice was incredibly effective. Hannibal was in charge. Will would let Hannibal make the decisions. Steer him. Shield him.

It turned his head foggy. Panic receding.

All of a sudden, Will found himself standing in one of the corners of the room, tucked away behind a large potted palm tree, with Hannibal's hands secure on his shoulders. Will's eyes, dry and stinging from having stared into empty space for what felt like years, finally blinked and he returned to reality. He became aware of the room once more. He became aware of the music in the background, the murmur of people. And he became aware of Hannibal's patient eyes. Will couldn't bring himself to look directly into them, as it dawned on him that he'd just had something akin to a panic-attack right there, in the middle of a rather crowded room. And all because of an innocent question.

Will felt himself implode slightly, wanting to press himself further into the corner, and turned away from Hannibal.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I'll be alright in a minute."

"Don't apologize. You're doing well."

" *Well* ?" Will scoffed a harsh, shuddering exhale. "Don't patronize me."

"I'm not. You're allowed to find this situation uncomfortable and distressing. I was prepared for this."

"Yeah?" Will stuffed his hands down his pockets and cleared his throat, stubbornly ignoring the instinctive need to press himself against the alpha. "Well, I wasn't. And I don't think Mr and Mrs Lucas were either."

"No, I suspect not." There was a hint of amusement in Hannibal's voice and Will turned a tired glare to the older man.

"I'm glad you're getting a kick out of this."

Hannibal smiled calmly and proceeded to fix Will's necktie with an expression that said absolutely nothing was out of the ordinary.

"While I'm sure that what you just experienced was emotionally taxing and that you likely perceived it as something monumentally conspicuous, let me assure you – hardly anyone noticed. You went quiet, and I removed us from the scene." He sent Will a reassuring look. "You're doing fine, Will."

Will, despite wanting to argue, conceded with a tired nod. Before he could say anything else, the lights in the room changed and the music quieted down. He looked around, confused as to what was going on, and noticed that everyone else in the room had now turned to the small lit-up stage next to the bar. A young woman was standing behind the podium, hair dyed bright purple and wearing a skin-tight green dress that enhanced each and every one of her curves. Omega, most likely. She gave the crowd a shy smile.

"Thank you all so much for coming to this vernissage," she began. "My name is Lisa Bright, and I'm the artist responsible for the chaos you're currently being subjected to…" She

released a nervous little giggle. “I suppose I should apologize for that.”

A soft rumble of laughter went through the room. Hannibal sent Will a raised eyebrow and gestured with his hand, suggesting they remove themselves from the corner. It was only a matter of time before someone took note of them – two grown men huddled behind a large tropical plant – and Will would rather not draw that kind of attention to himself, or Hannibal for that matter. They discreetly walked back out into the room, placing themselves by a table in the back. Will took a seat in one of the empty chairs, while Hannibal remained standing next to him.

As Lisa went on with her speech, Will took in the way she moved and spoke, rather than her words. As a profiler, he couldn’t really help it. There was something so confident and calculated about the way she held herself. The shyness, he realized, was only a mask. One designed to make her appear endearing and unassuming. She made a show of nervously twirling a strand of hair around her finger and patted the fabric of her dress out, as if wearing something so revealing was daunting and new. It was a fascinating display of manipulation, a near-flawless act that likely had most others fooled.

“She’s putting on a good show tonight,” Will heard someone whisper. He turned towards the sound, only to discover that there were two men sitting at the other side of the table where he’d just taken a seat. One of them sipped idly from a glass of wine. Despite the dim lights, Will noticed the man’s hair was an extremely pale shade of gray – though he looked to be around Will’s age, maybe even a few years younger. He hadn’t spoken to Will, but the man next to him – a big guy with a dark buzzcut. Said guy nodded and stifled an amused grin.

“She sure is, the little darling. If people only knew.”

The light-haired man laughed quietly, leaning back further in his chair to cross one leg over the other. He practically reeked self-confidence, and the gold studs in his ears only enhanced it. The scents from the people around them mingled in the air, making it difficult for Will to determine his genders. The big guy was definitely alpha, though. No beta had shoulders that broad.

Applause filled the room when Lisa exited the stage, the lights turned back on and the music continued. Will gave a half-hearted series of claps without really paying attention to the artist, who was already being crowded by a group of admirers by the bar. Instead he made to stand up, only to remain seated when Hannibal’s hand came down on his shoulder.

“Stay here, I’ll get you something to drink.” With that, the alpha left.

Will, who distinctly remembered the promise Hannibal had made earlier – *“I’ll stay with you”* – gaped after him, fighting the indignation and the feelings of abandonment, but stayed by the table as per Hannibal’s instruction. Although he would’ve preferred having the alpha close – and his preheat hormones agreed – it was either stay put, or run after his partner, potentially causing a scene. Will had already narrowly escaped the latter and wanted the rest of the evening to go as smoothly as possible.

Besides… There was something alarmingly comforting and reassuring about doing as

Hannibal said. He was already stuck in a situation that made him exceedingly uncomfortable and he found, with some amount of bemusement, that letting Hannibal call all the shots made the evening much more endurable. Hell, it made him feel *safe* . That didn't mean Will had come to terms with it, though.

"Would you get me something to drink as well?" The light-haired man said from somewhere next to Will, apparently having paid Will and Hannibal some attention. Will turned to look at him, just as the larger guy stood up with a nod and directed a fond smile at the silver-blonde.

"On the rocks?"

"You know it."

The alpha left, and Will found himself alone by the table with the silver-blonde, which meant polite small talk was now far more likely to occur. He suddenly found himself imagining different ways of inflicting physical pain to Hannibal for putting him in this situation. He kept his gaze averted, fiddling with his thumbs, until the guy spoke up.

"I've never seen you before," he said, and this time he was definitely speaking to Will.

"No, you wouldn't have. I'm not from around here," Will replied, keeping his gaze directed towards the bar, where Hannibal appeared to be taking his sweet time. Asshole.

"I've seen your alpha around, though."

Will shot an icy glance to the man next to him, but quickly turned his gaze back towards the bar.

"He's not 'my' alpha. And when exactly did you see him around?"

"Oh, he used to come visit all the time when I was a kid."

Will paused, eyebrows coming together in a confused frown. He turned to look at the silver-blonde, finally able to take in the soft olive eyes, the skinny nose, the golden septum piercing. Slim shoulders and the scent of nectarine. An amused little smirk rested on the man's lips, and Will might have glared at him in return, if it wasn't for one small but rather crucial detail.

The guy was an omega.

Hannibal approached the bar, feeling a sting of guilt for leaving Will by the table, knowing full well that the younger man wouldn't appreciate it. Not to mention, he'd gone back on his word. It was for a good reason, but still. Hannibal didn't like broken promises – least of all his own.

He ordered two glasses of champagne and glanced back towards the table in the back, just to see how Will was getting on. The omega, he found, was now holding a conversation with the man at the table – just as Hannibal had hoped – and he turned back to the bar, content for the time being in knowing that Will wasn't suffering too much from the separation. It had been a risky move, but hopefully it'd be worth it.

The drinks arrived on the counter and Hannibal extended his credit card to the bartender. As he waited for it to be returned to him, Mr Lucas came up to him once more, a concerned wrinkle sitting between his eyebrows.

"Is he feeling better? Did you bring him back to your suite?" The man spoke discreetly, not alerting anyone around them that anything might be wrong – something Hannibal greatly appreciated. He preferred keeping up appearances whenever possible.

"He's feeling better. He's actually sitting right over there," he said, gesturing to the table in the back, where Will was now turned towards the other young man. "With your son."

Mr Lucas looked over to the table and released a small sigh of relief. He turned back to Hannibal with an apologetic smile.

"I know you said something about a sudden dizzy spell, but… I saw the way he reacted to Nancy's words." The concerned wrinkle reappeared and deepened. "He's not accustomed to being out and about, is he?"

The two alphas' gazes met. Hannibal hesitated for a moment, before he replied.

"… No. He isn't." The card was given back to Hannibal, but he didn't return to where Will was sitting, opting instead to give it a bit more time. Mr Lucas nodded contemplatively.

"I think the unfortunate side-effect of parenting a male omega is that we don't always realize how distressing social situations can be for others of that same gender. Sebastian has always been so confident and proud… And Nancy grew up with an omega cousin who was just as pampered and self-assured. She never thought of them as dainty or fragile in any way-"

"There's no need to apologize for your wife, Arthur," Hannibal said, giving the other alpha a look. "In fact, I would argue that the way she perceives male omegas is exemplary. And Will abhors the idea of being treated differently because of his gender. He just didn't see it coming. It took him by surprise."

"Well, I can't say that I blame him."

"Neither can I, sadly. Society hasn't been kind in that regard."

"No, it certainly hasn't. Things are changing, though."

"Yes. It's just bothersome that these things tend to be rather time consuming."

"What, societal change?" The elderly man sent Hannibal a mildly amused glance. "You'd

prefer an immediate upheaval, wouldn't you? Just think of the chaos that would ensue."

Hannibal gave a brief chuckle and patted Mr Lucas' shoulder.

"I have missed conversing with you."

"Likewise, old friend."

Twenty percent of the population were alphas.

Seventy percent were beta.

Ten percent were omega.

And of all omegas, only two percent were male.

Two male omegas, out of one thousand people. The odds of there being two male omegas attending a party of roughly seventy guests was therefore relatively small. And yet.

"You've been staring at me without saying anything for a good minute and a half," the silver-blonde omega pointed out, raising one eyebrow. "I mean, I am devilishly good-looking, but seriously – it's starting to creep me out."

"Sorry," Will mumbled, quickly averting his eyes to the floor, frowning to himself.

It was baffling, in a way, how easily he picked up on the scent of the other omega, only for his body to respond with an entirely apathetic 'meh.'

Will had never been particularly sensitive to others' scents – mainly because the sandalwood perfume he'd been wearing conveniently served to block those out, which certainly came in handy when working with alphas – and training himself to not respond to the scent of betas hadn't taken much effort. Their scents were never particularly strong.

But there had always been *some* reaction. An instinctive, subconscious response to the scent of another gender. Hell, he'd even responded to female omegas, simply because they were *female*. Not necessarily in a manner of sexual attraction, but still a gentle tug on his instincts, recognizing and registering others' genders – because they differed from his own.

But not this time. No tugs on his instincts. No urge to back away or protect himself or even hide. Because the man in front of him was a male omega, just like Will.

It wasn't the very first time he'd ever met one, of course. But in addition to the fact that male omegas were a rare breed, many of them leaned towards hiding their gender – at least while out in public. While Will had taken it to an extreme by using suppressants daily and lying to

the entire FBI force about his gender, being a male omega wasn't generally something one would want to flaunt.

So to suddenly sit face to face with a male omega who appeared to have made no efforts whatsoever to hide his gender – embracing and enhancing it, more like it – was rather unprecedented. Especially to Will, who'd chosen to become a Wolf Trap recluse and avoided going to social events whenever possible.

A sudden wave of intense kinship and solidarity welled up in him, and he couldn't help but to glance back at the man, who kept observing him curiously, chin propped up on his hand.

"What did you mean when you said you've seen my alpha around?" Will asked, making an effort to sound as casual as he could, despite his previous dumbfounded stare. The silver-blonde straightened in his seat, placing his elbow on the table and letting his hand dangle.

"Hannibal Lecter is close friends with my father. He used to visit a lot when I was younger, though not as much in later years," the other omega explained, giving Will a friendlier smile than before. "What did you mean when you said he isn't 'your' alpha?"

"… We aren't mated," Will informed the other man, suddenly a tad uncomfortable at discussing such a private matter with someone he didn't know. "We're doing the whole… you know, courtship thing."

"'The courtship thing', huh?" There was that amused smirk again. "He's still technically yours, for the time being. I mean, he certainly thinks of you as his, so- oh, thanks," the silver-blonde smiled at the buzzcut alpha, who'd returned to the table with a glass of whiskey. The silver-blonde took a sip and turned back to Will with a wolfish grin – an expression Will never thought he'd see on an omega's face. "Just lean into it. You know? I mean, that's the whole point, right?"

Will, who at this point felt quite flabbergasted by the man's breezy behavior, blinked confusedly a couple of times before finding his words.

"I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Oh, didn't I say?" The silver-blonde took a quick sip from his glass and put it back on the table before extending a hand towards Will, who took it and gave a tentative shake. "I'm the hotel owner's son, Sebastian Lucas. Horrible combination of names, I know. It confuses the hell out of people, because it kind of sounds as though I have two first names." He laughed at himself and gestured to the alpha next to him. "And this is my husband, Brutus."

"It's Bruce," the alpha corrected, giving his partner a mildly chastising smile, and extended his hand to Will. "And I believe Mr. Two-first-names over here has had a little too much to drink."

"Brutus sounds cooler, and you know it," Sebastian commented with an amused grin, but didn't argue when the alpha removed the glass of whiskey, placing it a little further away from him. He turned back to Will with a shrug. "This one's always looking out for me. It's a

bit irritating."

"Looking out for you is kind of my job, honey," Bruce said idly, checking his phone in the process. "Since you're horrible at doing it yourself." Sebastian turned to him with a mild glare and Bruce smirked without taking his eyes off his phone. "Your father's words, not mine."

Sebastian turned back to Will with a sigh. Will couldn't help but to find the whole exchange fascinating. There was something so casual and easy-going between the couple in front of him, despite them being on opposite sides of the traditional social hierarchy. Something that sparked a bit of optimism inside of him. Made him relax a fraction.

"I know who your alpha is, but I never got *your* name," Sebastian pointed out and sent Will a demanding look.

"Will Graham. And again – Hannibal isn't my alpha."

"*Yet*," Sebastian added and made an attempt to reach for his glass, only for Bruce to swiftly move it even further away – still without taking his eyes off the phone. The silver-blonde clicked his tongue once and settled back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "Honestly, you gotta lock that down."

"Excuse me?"

Sebastian suddenly leaned in closer towards Will, eyes sparkling with the joy of gossiping.

"Hannibal Lecter is a *very* coveted alpha. You have no idea how many broken hearts that man has left in his trail."

"Yours being one of them?" Will asked before he could stop himself, and thoroughly enjoyed the look of amused surprise that spread across Sebastian's features.

"Damn, kitty's got claws." He composed himself quickly, appearing to sober up a bit. "Dr. Lecter has always been a socialite. I remember banquets being arranged just so that rich, unmated omegas would get the chance to meet him. Hell, my father hosted one or two of those banquets. I'm telling you, guy's practically royalty. And what with him being so unattainable and aloof, it's no wonder people practically threw themselves at him." He gave a rueful sigh. "But eventually, since the years went by and he never took a mate, people sort of gave up and collectively accepted the fact that Hannibal Lecter would forever remain a bachelor."

"I had no idea…" Will shook his head in disbelief. "Is that why your mother was so surprised to see me?"

"Oh, you met my mom?" Sebastian grinned. "She tried, *desperately* I might add, to set Hannibal up with one of her best friends at the time. I think she actually took offense when Hannibal wouldn't budge. She sulked for several weeks after that. Though I'm guessing she didn't tell you that story, huh?"

“No,” Will confirmed, turning away from the other omega with a polite smile. “She didn’t.”

And neither had Hannibal. It suddenly dawned on Will that he knew very little about the alpha he was being courted by. It also dawned on him that he wanted to know more. He glanced over to the bar, where Hannibal was now talking to Mr Lucas, holding two glasses in his hands. He didn’t appear to be on his way back yet. Frustrating.

“I hadn’t even presented as an omega back then,” Sebastian continued, following Will’s gaze, “but man, if I had – I’m sure I would’ve thrown myself at him, too. He’s delicious.” Bruce cleared his throat loudly and placed his phone on the table, extending an arm to place it around the back of Sebastian’s chair. Sebastian sent his mate a fond, reassuring grin and placed his hand on Bruce’s thigh, fingers curling possessively around the alpha’s knee. “Thankfully, I ended up with someone even better.”

Bruce smiled, clearly appeased, but before he could say anything, his phone buzzed. With a muttered curse, the alpha picked the device up and rolled his eyes before pressing his thumb at the screen.

“What do you want, Devon? I *told* you- No. No, those haven’t been green-lit yet. Yes, and you would have known that, if you’d…” He trailed off with a frustrated sigh and sent Sebastian an apologetic look. Sebastian gave him a nod in return and the alpha walked away from the table, phone pressed to his ear.

“He seems like a busy guy,” Will mused out loud, and Sebastian gave a shrug.

“People tend to rely more on alphas,” he explained, reaching for his now unattended whiskey glass, though he seemed content with merely swirling its contents around. “That’s why they always call him whenever there’s a problem. Even on his days off, and even though it’s not *his* responsibility,” he added, the last few words muttered and laced with irritation. Before Will could say anything more, Sebastian seemed to perk himself up. “Tell me, how did you and Dr. Lecter meet?”

“Oh,” Will faltered, unsure of what to say. “Uh…”

‘Well, you see, I had a minor mental break-down at work after I had to take down a serial killer by shooting him – ten times – and Hannibal was assigned as my psychiatrist and then he discovered that I was an omega despite my best efforts to hide it from the whole world, I became immune to my suppressants because I’m so goddamned attracted to him and all of this led to me agreeing to a courtship in exchange for secret forensic information regarding a case I’ve been suspended from.’

“We… met through my work,” Will said lamely. “I’m a forensic profiler and Hannibal sometimes assists with cases.”

“Really?” Sebastian leaned closer, genuine surprise evident in his eyes. “You work in law enforcement? God, I could never do that. I mean, it’s such an alpha-dominated sphere.” He made a face of aversion. “All that alpha-T and inevitable power struggle in one place…

Doesn't it get tiring?"

"I manage okay," Will lied, throwing another glance towards the bar. Why was Hannibal taking so damned long? Impatience made his skin prickle. He turned back to Sebastian to distract himself. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm an art dealer," Sebastian said, and winked at Will, "by day, anyway. By night I manage a nightclub my dad invested in a couple of years back. I'm having fun with it."

Will couldn't help but balk at Sebastian's profession. For a male omega, it seemed even more bizarre to manage a nightclub – a place where people specifically went to get drunk and hunt for sexual encounters – than to work for the FBI. Especially since Sebastian didn't seem to concern himself with the idea of concealing his gender, not even a little bit.

"Isn't that a bit risky?" He asked carefully. "I mean, aren't you ever… afraid something might happen?"

Sebastian paused in his movements just as he was about to bring the whiskey glass to his bottom lip. His gaze searched Will's, narrowing ever so slightly, and Will knew that Sebastian knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Sure," Sebastian said eventually, nodding slowly as he put his glass back down. "But what's the alternative? I can either sit home and hide, blame myself for something that isn't my fault, or I can go out there and just… fucking conquer the world."

A languid, fearless grin lit up his face as he leaned back in his chair, gesturing with his hands as if he was a king sitting on his throne. Will couldn't help feeling a bit mesmerized. A huff of uncertain laughter escaped him and he looked away, suddenly finding it difficult to look at the other man.

"You're very confident, aren't you?"

"Yep. And you aren't," Sebastian countered. "Why is that, Graham? You're a bright, attractive man. But I can practically smell the self-loathing from here."

Will gritted his teeth, insulted irritation stirring within. Sebastian Lucas, who'd grown up in Chicago and by all accounts had had a rather luxurious upbringing, knew *nothing* about Will or where he came from. Who the hell was he to make judgements?

"Yeah, well… Guess we can't all conquer the world," he said stiffly, staring towards the bar in an attempt to *will* the alpha back to his side. Hannibal continued speaking to the elderly alpha without noticing Will's gaze, and it turned the irritation into anger.

Stop ignoring me. Come back. Now.

"Graham…"

You said you'd stay with me all night. Get the fuck back *here.*

“Earth to Graham.”

Hannibal finally turned to look at Will, who was now putting every ounce of irritation in his expression, hand tightly clamping down on the table as he wordlessly communicated to the alpha just how badly Will needed him by his side, furious that it had taken the man this fucking long to take note. To his immense satisfaction, Hannibal’s expression shifted into mild alarm – though he doubted anyone else would’ve noticed the minute change – and gave a polite nod to the older alpha before he started making his way back towards the table, only to be hindered by Lisa Bright.

The female artist – in her tight green dress – stopped the alpha mid-stride and placed her hand on his arm, clearly attempting to initiate a conversation. The fact that she was an omega did not help.

It was only a split second, but Will bristled. Something within him snapped, and he stood up, ready to charge at the bitch for having the audacity to-

“Hey… *Will*!” Sebastian was suddenly right in front of him, effectively shielding the view of Hannibal and Lisa, pulling Will back to reality and it left him reeling. Sebastian’s eyes were large and concerned as they looked into Will’s. “Shit, you’re in preheat. *And* you look like you want to strangle my cousin. Did you forget to take your suppressants?”

“They stopped working,” Will mumbled dazedly, without thinking, and sat back down heavily. His skin had started aching once more, and he brought a hand up to rub at his nape, without making it too obvious to the people around them just how uncomfortable he was. Sebastian pulled a chair closer to sit down next to him, eyes filled with pained sympathy.

“Ah. So *that’s* how you’ve ‘managed okay’ at work. Man… You’ve had it rough, huh?” Sebastian said, keeping his voice low. “Want me to get you a glass of water?”

Will manage to catch another glance of Hannibal over Sebastian’s shoulder, and although it was clear that the alpha was trying to extract himself from the artist, she was insistent and kept clinging to his arm in a way that would make it impossible for Hannibal to remove her without using some manner of force, and that would definitely get people’s attention. Will felt sick.

I’d rather you remove that grabby skank from my-

“Water would be good,” Will mustered, closing his eyes in exhaustion. Sebastian gave him a pat on the shoulder and left. Will stayed seated, keeping his eyes closed – partly due to the budding headache, but mainly because he wanted to spare himself the view of another omega throwing herself at…

My alpha.

Will took a shuddering intake of air and shook his head softly to himself.

What the hell is he doing to me?

Skin prickled uncomfortably, nausea churned in his gut.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, it just… stopped.

A pair of hands came down on each side of his neck, fingers gently stroking his skin. A scent that Will recognized, familiar and heavenly. Bergamot. *Hannibal*. Steel. It anchored him and brought him back, slowly.

He cracked his eyes open and found himself dazedly looking at Hannibal's necktie. The alpha was leaning down slightly to get a closer look, expression tight as he searched Will's gaze.

"Are you alright?" He asked. If Will hadn't been so out of it, he might've noticed the hint of rough concern in those husky tones. Thumbs caressed Will's jawline on each side.

"What took you so long?" He managed, though it came out as a harsh whisper. Hannibal's lips twitched in a brief smile, though his expression was still too tight for it to look genuine.

"I was detained."

"Yeah, I saw," Will snapped and reached up to tug on Hannibal's tie, surprising himself with the aggressive possessiveness that welled up in him, barely registering the words that left him. "Is her scent on you?"

Hannibal's eyebrows drew together and he placed one firm, steadying hand on one side of Will's neck, before leaning in to press his skin against Will's. The reassuring contact made his head spin. He tugged on Hannibal's tie to bring the alpha closer, his free hand coming up around Hannibal's neck to keep him there. Hannibal allowed it. Comforting warmth spread throughout his body, easing the aggression away, until all that remained was fatigue and the intense desire to stay close to the older man.

Seconds or hours could have passed, Will wasn't sure, but eventually, they separated, and Will found himself immensely thankful for the fact that the table was in the back. Nobody was looking their way. Nobody appeared to have noticed. Perhaps it was just that unlike Will, these people didn't think it bizarre that a courting pair would scent each other, even if they were out in public.

"Feeling better?" Hannibal asked, taking a seat on the chair previously occupied by Sebastian. Will realized that he was still holding Hannibal's (incredibly expensive) silk tie in a firm grip, and quickly let go of the fabric, wincing inwardly as he took in the tie's crumpled state. In response to Hannibal's question, he cleared his throat and nodded without saying anything. He didn't even feel like apologizing - which would've normally been his first instinct.

He really was feeling better. So much better. His entire body let him know just how much better he felt. Pulsating, warm, tingling. Content and safe. He looked back up at Hannibal. Took in the sharp jaw, the calm eyes. Felt something stir within.

“Just lean into it.”

Lean into what, exactly? This?

Risky. Dangerous. Disgraceful.

And yet.

“Am I interrupting?”

Sebastian had returned to the table with a large glass of water and was now watching Will tensely, clearly trying to determine whether Will’s preheat symptoms were still out of control. When he looked over at Hannibal, however, he seemed to relax a bit. He handed the glass of water over to Hannibal, perhaps in a show of respect, who in turn offered it to Will.

Will wordlessly accepted the glass and drank, slowly, as he digested what had just taken place. The cold water perked him up and after a little while, Will found himself feeling rather restored – at least in a physical sense. He was still disoriented and emotionally drained after everything that had happened, however, and said nothing as he put the empty glass on the table. Hannibal seemed to pick up on it.

“Would you care to take a walk with me?” He asked, voice mild and patient, and placed his hand on Will’s knee. “Some fresh air might do you good.”

Will looked down at the hand, alarmingly aware of the sizzling heat that spread over his leg from the touch, and nodded. He looked up to meet Hannibal’s gaze, heart pounding heavily in his chest.

“Fresh air sounds nice.”

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

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Bourbon

Chapter Notes

Note: major revision in progress, March 2024

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will concluded that it was cold. Too cold to only be wearing a suit jacket over his shirt, and too cold to be walking next to the alpha without constantly fighting the urge to draw closer in order to steal some of his warmth. Hannibal had, of course, offered to collect his jacket from their suite, but Will had promptly declined. Hannibal's coat was a work of art, whereas his own jacket was one he'd snagged from the sales pile at H&M. Even he knew that he would look like an idiot wearing that astrocity over his suit, especially next to Hannibal, and he'd rather stay clear of further embarrassment.

So now, he was cold.

"Are you feeling better?" The alpha offered, sending Will a glance. He nodded.

"Yeah." It wasn't a lie. Will was feeling better. The fresh air had managed to chase most of the anxiety away and he was feeling clear-headed and energized. Though cold. And hungry. He could've eaten back at the hotel, but for various unspoken reasons, he'd chosen to instead focus on the free wine.

They were, conveniently enough, surrounded by a plentiful of nice-looking restaurants and Will threw a longing glance towards one that appeared to be specializing in Japanese cuisine.

"Hungry?" Hannibal gave him a knowing smile. Will let out an abashed cough.

"A bit."

"Then, shall we find someplace to eat?" Hannibal suggested. "We ought to be able to find some place where we can get in without a reservation."

Will, whose stomach was soundly letting him know what a marvelous idea that was, agreed. They walked for another minute or two until they came across a pub claiming to serve "street foods with a flair", whatever that meant. Will recalled their exchange in the elevator and suddenly found himself dying for a burger. Though the pub's exterior led him to believe that the place held a certain level of class - not at all like the casual fast food places Will frequented - he found himself drawn to it. He gave Hannibal a hopeful look.

"Here?" Hannibal gave the pub an assessing look. "I don't mind, but you do realize that there are other options."

“Here is good,” Will said, failing to suppress a shiver. “I just want to get out of the cold for now.”

Hannibal drew in closer to him to place an arm around Will’s shoulders, chasing some of the cold away, and nodded.

“Then, here is good.”

They headed inside and were immediately greeted by the unmistakable scent of fried potato, spices, and ale. Will could hear the hiss of meat being cooked from within the kitchen, though most of it was muffled by the pleasant lounge music and the clinking of cutlery against plates. The place certainly wasn’t empty, but the number of guests was still pleasantly low. Will sighed with relief.

A young waiter approached them with a polite smile.

“Table for two?”

“With a bit of privacy, if possible,” Hannibal added.

“Right this way, gentlemen,” the waiter said and gestured for them to follow him.

He led them to a corner further in, furnished with a table and two chairs. The overall interior was dimly lit, but the table was illuminated by a couple of candles. It created an undeniably romantic atmosphere and Will felt a tightening in his chest at the notion of spending the next couple of hours there, with Hannibal.

He moved past the waiter to take a seat and Hannibal followed his example. Once they were both seated, their gazes locked and Will offered the alpha a careful smile. Hannibal smiled back, reassuringly, before glancing to the waiter who, Will realized, still hadn’t left.

When Will turned to look at the young man, he found - with a hint of worry - that the waiter was staring right back at him. His eyes appeared darker due to enlarged pupils and the way his nostrils flared turned Will’s hint of worry into full-blown anxiety. Despite this, he managed to clear his throat and quirk an eyebrow at the waiter.

“Is something the matter?”

This appeared to snap the young man out of whatever had been possessing him, and he blinked repeatedly, taking a step back.

“I’m- … Sorry,” he said and his face lit up with embarrassment as he struggled to collect himself. “My apologies. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes to take your order,” he spoke quickly and gave a quick nod before he turned and walked away. Will stared confusedly after him before turning back to Hannibal, who, Will found, was also gazing after the waiter - though not with confusion, but with an expression akin to irritation.

“Hannibal?”

The alpha’s gaze met Will’s, and the irritation smoothed out into a warmer expression. Will’s eyebrows came together in a confused frown and the alpha cleared his throat.

“I don’t mean to alarm you, but I suspect your current state is bound to attract some additional attention.” Hannibal glanced over Will’s shoulder, jaw ticking in annoyance. “Young alphas,” he scoffed softly, as if exasperated.

Will stared in horror at the older man.

“Additional attention?”

“Pheromones intensify temporarily with preheat,” Hannibal elaborated, effortlessly sounding very much like the medical professional he was, much to Will’s growing dread. “It’ll likely stabilize in a day or two, don’t worry.”

“Too late,” Will said grimly. “Let’s just leave.”

“Why?” Hannibal sent him a calm look, contrasting the anxious scowl Will sent him.

“Hannibal, I don’t want to… *flaunt* what’s happening to me,” he harshly whispered the last words, giving the alpha an outraged look. “It’s private, for god’s sake! And…” He trailed off, glancing over his shoulder, suddenly nervous to find anyone else in the restaurant looking at him the way that waiter had just a short while ago. “Fucking unnerving.”

“I’m here.” Hannibal said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Like he was pointing out that the sky was blue and the grass was green. Will swallowed tightly and forced himself to relax back into his seat.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to be my chaperone,” he commented tersely, because that’s what this was starting to feel like. Hannibal bobbed an eyebrow in acknowledgement.

“I thought you said you feel secure in my company.”

Will snapped his mouth shut and lowered his gaze. Conflicting emotions welled up in him, crashing violently against one another. Because on the one hand - yes. He did feel secure in Hannibal’s company. So secure, in fact, that he didn’t want to leave the alpha’s side for even a moment, even if admitting that to himself caused him near-physical pain. But on the other hand, he hated having to rely on the alpha for this. The preheat was a humiliating inconvenience by itself; he hadn’t stopped to consider that it’d make him more susceptible to attention. Attention that he definitely did not want. Honestly, what choice did he have?

“I don’t like this,” he finally admitted.

“I understand that. But it’s only temporary,” Hannibal said.

“Yeah, but it’s… *humiliating* ,” he bit out. “It’s embarrassing that I have to sit here and have

people *notice* that I'm…" He sighed, frustrated.

"It doesn't have to be. This is part of being an omega, Will." Hannibal's voice was irritatingly patient. "You need to learn how to embrace this if you want to utilize the strengths that are within your reach."

"There *is* another option, and you know it," Will said curtly, looking back up at the alpha, already fully prepared for the disapproving look he received in return.

"Rendering yourself sick by pretending to be something you're not?" Hannibal sent him a chilly look. "You honestly think that's feasible? More to the point, you think that sounds like the *better* option?"

Will's glare faltered under Hannibal's, and he looked away, feeling defeated.

"... No," he admitted. "Not really. This is all just very…"

"Uncomfortable?"

" *New* ." Will straightened in his seat, studying the items occupying their table, mostly just to have something to look at that wasn't the alpha's piercing eyes. He reached for the menu. "New is terrifying."

"Allow me then to point out something blatantly obvious - every single thing in your life has, at one point, been new to you."

Will nodded without looking up, pretending instead to read the menu.

"I know. It shouldn't surprise you to hear I've lived my whole life in fear." His lips curled into a bitter, self-deprecating smile. "And it doesn't look like that's about to change any time soon."

"I think you'll find, eventually," Hannibal said, tone having dropped to a more comforting octave, "that the shackles of fear will be a mere distant memory to you."

Will gave a soft scoff of doubt, but didn't argue - mostly because he suspected Hannibal would win either way, though he still found the notion unlikely at best. Fear, a distant memory. He couldn't even picture that.

After a short while, the waiter returned to their table, notepad at the ready. Will noted that the man avoided looking at him, even as he spoke directly to Will to take his order. Will regarded the young alpha quietly as he struggled to scribble down their orders, reluctantly fascinated by the way the waiter was behaving. For a split second, the young alpha's eyes darted his way and locked with Will's. Something utterly amazing happened. The guy *blushed* .

Well. That was new.

Once their orders were taken, the waiter left in a steaming hurry and the two men were left to

converse in private. Hannibal had previously made something akin to a very subtle eye-roll when Will made his order, but waited until now to speak his mind.

“A cheeseburger?” Hannibal quirked an amused eyebrow.

“What?” Will shrugged. “It was right there on the menu.”

“You already eat them on a regular basis. Why not try something else?”

“Why try something else when I already know what I like?”

“That’s an alarmingly fearful philosophy.”

“Yeah, shocking, isn’t it?” Will drawled, though his lips curled into an amused smirk - he knew what a pain in the ass he was being. Hannibal let out a sigh, but his expression betrayed him - he was enjoying the banter.

“What on earth is so good about cheeseburgers anyway? Educate me.”

“Uh, well… my dad used to take me out for burgers all the time when I was a kid.” Will shrugged. “I grew up on the stuff. And as we’ve established, I’m a creature of habit.”

“He didn’t cook for you?”

Will’s face briefly twisted into a grimace of bitterness without his permission.

“My old man is what you’d call ‘conservative’... According to him, alphas didn’t belong in kitchens. And my mother wasn't there. So, yeah. No home-cooked meals for me. My diet, while I was growing up, mainly consisted of pop tarts, cereal, and burgers. Not that I complained.”

“Your father is an alpha, then?”

“Yep.”

“How is your relationship with him?”

Will looked up, feeling himself tense up, and caught Hannibal’s gaze. The brown eyes glowed in the candlelight.

“I’m not your patient, Hannibal.”

“I’m aware. That’s not why I’m asking.”

“Then why?”

“I’m asking because I wish to know more about you.”

Will pressed his teeth together.

“Tell me something about yourself first,” he countered. “It occurred to me earlier tonight that I don’t really know anything about you. Sebastian Lucas told me some interesting things about your past, though.”

“Oh?” Hannibal gave a small smile. “Pray tell.”

“He said that banquets were arranged, just so omegas would get the chance to meet you,” Will summarized, quirking a mildly amused eyebrow in the process, “and that you’re ‘practically royalty.’ Should I start calling you ‘milord’?”

“I’d rather you didn’t. Terribly outdated. Furthermore, I’m not royalty - my father was a count, however,” Hannibal replied, tone light and unfazed. “So, in a way, I suppose I qualify as an aristocrat.”

“Wow, really?” Will commented, eyebrows raised. “And here I thought maybe the guy was just drunk and exaggerating.”

“He was, let me assure you,” Hannibal said dismissively. “I’m not my father. And anyway, my father died many years ago and I never cared to inherit his title. We weren’t very close.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“You don’t have to be. It doesn’t particularly bother me.” Hannibal’s frank tone confirmed this. “As for the banquets that were arranged… As far as I remember, I only attended a handful of those - and they weren’t arranged specifically for *me* . Plenty of alphas and omegas were invited.”

“So omegas weren’t ‘practically throwing themselves’ at you?” Will questioned, realizing too late just how jealous this made him seem. But if Hannibal thought so, too, he didn’t comment on it.

“Sebastian Lucas was still young when all this took place. His memories may well have been twisted over time.” He paused. “Still, since I believe some level of transparency is important in a courtship, I won’t deny that I was asked to court a number of betas and omegas in my younger years. I accepted very few - and evidently, none led to any deeper commitment.”

Will gave a slow nod to show that he was listening, but he found that he was unsure of how to respond.

How come none of your previous courtships worked out? What is ‘our’ courtship to you? Could ‘this’ lead to deeper commitment?

He voiced none of this.

“I see.”

The food was delivered to their table. Different waiter this time. When a plate full of french fries and a lovely burger was placed in front of Will, the full intensity of his hunger came roaring to the surface. Without any further ado, Will picked his burger up and took a large bite.

The melted cheese was heavenly, and Will let out a soft moan to express his enjoyment. Hannibal paused to look up at him.

“How is it?”

“Perfection,” Will sighed after swallowing his first bite, and immediately took another.

“I’m glad,” the alpha smiled. “So,” he continued, “I’ve told you something about me. I do believe it’s your turn.”

“Right,” Will sighed, putting his hamburger down and immediately wished he’d just said ‘no’ right from the start. “What do you want to know?”

“Your father. How is your relationship with him?”

Even though he’d suspected Hannibal was going to ask him about that, Will cringed inwardly. He made an effort not to show it.

“He and I were pretty close when I was little. Mom died shortly after I was born, so I mean, he was a single father… Things weren’t always easy, but we did okay, aside from what he deemed appropriate nourishment for a growing boy.” He paused, and cleared his throat. “But then one day, I, uh… I turned out to be an omega.” Will shrugged, hoping it wasn’t too obvious how painful of a topic this was for him. “Things got tense after that. Really tense. I haven’t talked to him in years.”

He sent Hannibal a brief smile and returned to his cheeseburger, hoping the alpha was satisfied, now that he’d given him a basic overview of what he’d wanted to know. Hannibal considered his words for a while, cocking his head slightly to one side.

“How did *you* react when you presented?”

I cried myself to sleep every night for the first three months.

“Surely you can make an educated guess.” Will let the dry tone of his voice communicate just how rough that particular revelation had been on him. He put a french fry in his mouth and chewed, without really tasting the fried potato, and hoped Hannibal would drop the subject soon. To his immense frustration, the alpha didn’t.

“Where did you grow up?”

“In the middle of nowhere,” Will drawled. “Warm, dusty, tumbleweed rolling past our front door every morning. That give you an idea?”

“And the people in your immediate surroundings? Were they-”

“Hannibal.” Will’s voice dropped dangerously low as he sent the older man a chilly, apprehensive look. “Do we have to do this? Now?”

The alpha’s brows came together slightly.

“No. I suppose we don’t. My apologies. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

Will swallowed the food he’d been chewing, with some difficulty, and collected himself.

“Look, I know you’re trying to help me.” There was a mild edge to his voice, despite his efforts to speak carefully. “This is just… a topic I’m not altogether comfortable discussing with you right now. Maybe someday, but not now. Is that okay?”

Hannibal gave him a gentle look and nodded.

“Of course.”

Hannibal hated to admit it, but he was frustrated. Normally, he was able to read people like books - a skill most psychiatrists eventually acquired after years of listening to people spill their hearts out - but Will was different. It was as irritating as it was attractive.

There were, of course, some parts of the omega that Hannibal was effortlessly able to draw out, to dissect, analyze and utilize. Things that he’d hoped would help him snare the younger man, curl his fingers around him - but he had yet to form a fist. Will evidently had secrets that he guarded much more carefully than Hannibal had expected him to, and it bothered him.

He watched as the younger man devoured his favorite dish, without ever looking up to meet his gaze. Damnit. He’d pushed too hard, too soon, and unwittingly made the omega take an apprehensive step back. Trust was still an immense issue there.

Hannibal had no doubt that Will had good reasons to keep his lips tight when it came to certain aspects of his upbringing. Aspects too severe to share, even with someone as persuasive as Hannibal.

He needed to shift Will’s focus to something else. Something that would, hopefully, brighten his mood, even just a little bit. But what? There were so few things the younger man took genuine interest in, aside from his dogs, maybe. And his work at the BSU. But bringing up that particular subject would be disastrous right now.

There was one thing he knew that the omega appreciated, however.

“Would you care for a drink?” Hannibal offered and was instantly rewarded - Will looked up at him, still chewing on his last few french fries, and gave a slow nod.

The man had already had several glasses of wine at the hotel, but now that he'd had a decent meal, the omega was apparently ready for more. Under normal circumstances, Hannibal might've been concerned. He didn't like the notion of Will turning to alcohol every time he became overwhelmed or upset. But tonight, for just a few hours, he wanted the younger man to relax. The day had been an emotionally taxing ordeal for the both of them, and he'd be damned if he couldn't grant Will a pleasant end to the day.

So Hannibal waved a waiter over - a beta this time, thank goodness - and ordered a glass of red wine for himself. Will ordered a glass of bourbon, neat. Strong stuff, but Will's tolerance had proven itself to be rather impressive. Hannibal said nothing.

Plates were cleared away and their drinks arrived shortly thereafter. Hannibal nursed his glass carefully, whereas Will took a liberal sip of his bourbon as soon as it arrived and closed his eyes in contentment as he swallowed. It was almost endearing. Hannibal smiled.

"Good?"

"You have no idea," Will sighed and took another sip.

"I didn't mean for tonight to turn into such a stressful time for you," Hannibal said, noticing the way Will's hand stilled for a second before bringing the glass to his lips. The omega let out a breathy, somewhat bitter laugh.

"This whole trip has been a bit of a disaster, hasn't it?"

Hannibal tried not to let those words smart in his chest, but they did, and it was rare and therefore an extremely odd sensation. So odd, in fact, that Hannibal didn't quite have the time to hide the hurt. Will appeared to notice - just like he had before - and his expression softened.

"None of this is your fault." Will's expression turned bitter once more, but it was more introverted this time. His eyes wandered away from Hannibal and locked onto the lit candle. "I'm just… bad at this."

"Bad at what?"

Will gave a shrug.

"Travelling. Courting. Being an omega. I'm bad at all of it." Another swig of bourbon followed these words. "You picked a real winner, Lecter."

This was *not* the effect Hannibal had hoped the alcohol would have on his partner. Will was quickly falling down the same spiral of self-hatred he'd already fallen through so many times before and it was bizarre and unsettling to witness.

"Look at me," Hannibal said. Will did. "I want you to do me a favor," Hannibal said, holding the omega's gaze firmly. "I want you to tell me what you think being an omega actually

means."

Will looked taken aback for a moment. Then his forehead wrinkled in thought. He took another sip from his glass. It was already half-empty.

"Looking pretty on an alpha's arm," he sighed eventually, eyes darkening with suppressed irritation. "Submissive, pliant, *wanton* -"

"Those are stereotypes. You know that." Hannibal made no attempts to sound kind nor patient now. It seemed to surprise Will, who looked up at him with wider eyes than before. "What do *you* think it means to be an omega?"

"... I think," Will swallowed tightly and looked away again, expression tight. "I think it means being prey. I think it means being unable to control my body. Being weaker than you. Being frightened. Always looking over my shoulder. Being unable to defend myself. It means seeking your protection when I'm in fucking preheat and... *hating* myself for it." His face twisted into a furious grimace at the last few words.

Hannibal regarded the man in front of him, ignoring the way his chest ached at Will's words. There was so much to unpack there. So many misconceptions, so much self-loathing. He kept his expression cool while he waited for Will to finally turn back to him.

"Alright. Now I want you to do me another favor." Will didn't say anything. He merely sent Hannibal a tired look of reluctant compliance. "Pretend, for a while, that you are the exact opposite of that. That you are, in fact, not prey. That you are able to control your body. That you aren't weaker than me. That you aren't frightened."

"Hannibal, I can't-"

"Come now, it's merely a game. All you have to do is to pretend." Hannibal reached for his wine glass. "You're something of an expert at that, no?"

It was Will's turn to look hurt. Hannibal knew, however, that hurt had a wonderfully spurring effect on Will. He was so stubborn that way. Always so eager to prove himself, despite the attitude that suggested he deemed himself entirely inadequate.

"Fine. I'll play along." Will seemed calm on the outside, but Hannibal knew the omega was pissed off. It showed in the way he held himself, in the way his jaw jutted out. And he was drunk, which would hopefully remove some of his inhibitions.

"How brave of you," Hannibal said, earning himself a look of stubborn resolve from Will, and finished his glass of wine in one large swig. "Look at that. I'm suddenly in need of more wine."

He raised his arm and waved a waiter over once more. This time, the young alpha from before showed up next to their table. Will sent him a look of enraged horror and Hannibal, being far less kind than he had been up until that point, returned the look with a challenging smirk.

Show me.

"What can I get you, gentlemen?" The waiter spoke with feigned ease and seemed intent on carefully avoiding Will's gaze, obviously hoping for Hannibal to do the talking. But the alpha obviously had other ideas. He sent Will an expectant smile, quietly raising one eyebrow. Will cursed inwardly.

Why? Why the hell did you say you'd play along?

Will reached for his glass of bourbon and finished it off in a series of painful gulps. Liquor that strong wasn't meant to be chugged. He shuddered in discomfort, but managed to collect himself. Suppress the pain. Let the burn take over, and scrambled for something to say or do, and then, all of a sudden, he thought of Sebastian.

The languid smirk. The way he'd leaned back in his chair, confident, proud and fearless, declaring his plans to 'fucking conquer the world'.

"You're very confident, aren't you?"

"Yep, and you aren't… I can practically smell the self-loathing from here."

Will distinctly remembered the way those words had made him feel genuinely insulted for a moment, before ultimately accepting that Sebastian had probably been right. But Will couldn't be like Sebastian. Not even if he didn't suffer from crippling self-loathing, because Sebastian's personality was essentially the very opposite of his own. And then, very reluctantly, he thought of Lisa Bright.

Lisa fucking Bright. Or, as Will had momentarily dubbed her; the grabby skank. But she hadn't been grabby *before* she ran into Hannibal, had she? Will thought back to when he'd watched her give her speech; the calculated movements she'd made, her soft-spokenness. The flawlessly faked shyness that made her both endearing and desirable to her audience.

Fuck. He was going to hate himself for this.

Will took a breath, turned to the waiter and arranged a careful smile.

"The bourbon was exquisite," he said. The young alpha, having just watched Will down it all in a few seconds, gave him a confused look.

"Glad… to hear it," he returned the smile nervously. "Can I get you anything else?"

Will cleared his throat and sent Hannibal a deliberately uncertain look.

"What was it you had? Chianti?" Upon Hannibal's quiet nod, Will turned back to the waiter,

rubbing a hand across his nape. “A refill, then. Sorry, I don’t know much about wines,” he released a soft, vaguely unsteady laugh. “Um, could you... recommend something for me?”

The waiter was looking mildly apprehensive now, throat constricting as he swallowed.

“Certainly,” he said, making a valiant effort to give Will a professional smile. “Any particular preferences?”

Will paused at that, taking his time to lower his eyelashes ever so slightly, briefly letting his gaze wander down the young alpha’s body, because that’s what he imagined Lisa Bright would do, if she were in this situation. He may not be able to seamlessly take on Sebastian's character - the guy was all cocky grins and charisma - but *this* he could do. Will had never been socially skilled, so he could be shy. Will didn't have much experience with alphas, so he could be innocent. He could be *whatever* it was that made alphas feel so fucking superior.

“Something sweet,” he said and averted his gaze as if he'd just caught himself doing something he wasn't supposed to. “Surprise me.”

He glanced back up at the young man, offering him a small, soft smile. The alpha stared slack-jawed at Will for a second, before apparently coming back to his senses and scribbling down something in his notepad.

“Something… uh, sweet,” he repeated, clearing his throat as his cheeks lit up. He then sent an apprehensive look to Hannibal. “And a glass of Chianti. Coming right up.” He turned and walked away with brisk steps.

Will shook his shoulders, as if trying to rid himself of an odd sensation, and leaned his elbows on top of the table. Once he finally gathered the courage to look over at Hannibal, he found the alpha staring at him with an odd clash of pride and withheld temper. Will winced inwardly and looked away again, eyebrows knitting together.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Will said, subdued and uncomfortable, but... there was also a part of him that felt strangely satisfied with himself. Like he’d just stretched muscles he hadn’t moved in many, many years and found out they carried strength. “I feel dirty.”

“Why? You were amazing.”

The praise was so sudden and so unexpected that Will’s mouth fell open in surprise, gaze locking with Hannibal's. Slowly, he felt warmth creep into his cheeks and he frowned, secretly relishing in the flutters of pleasure those words had caused. To hide how pleased he was, he scoffed dryly.

“And you look like you want to strangle someone.”

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice was so soft, so beckoning, that Will couldn’t resist. He turned back to the man with a slight frown. Contrary to the soft tone of his voice, Hannibal was smirking. “How do you feel?”

For a split second, Will hated Hannibal. Truly hated him for making him face this terrifying truth. For being so damned smug about it. And most of all, he hated Hannibal for the arousal that sparked in Will at that question - a flame that had *nothing* to do with the bourbon that burned his insides. His breath stuttered.

“Screw you,” he muttered. Hannibal smirk stretched wider, as if he knew what Will was thinking. What he wouldn’t say.

Powerful.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

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Close

Chapter Notes

:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was barely noticeable, but Will did sway a bit as he rose from his chair. Okay, so he *hoped* it wasn't noticeable. It may have been a little noticeable. Hannibal gave him an mildly amused look, seemingly ready to step in if Will needed assistance, but still managed to make it look as though he was paying more attention to the check than to his partner.

"I think," Will cleared his throat, "I may be a little bit intoxicated."

"I think you may be stating the obvious," Hannibal replied calmly and tucked a generous tip under the check. Will glared at him, though getting his eyes to actually focus on the alpha turned out to be a challenge when there were suddenly *two* Hannibals in front of him.

"This… is entirely your fault."

"How is it my fault?"

"You kept buying me drinks," Will huffed, dragging his fingers through his hair in an effort to compose himself. "Given my track record, that's just irresponsible."

"How very careless of me," the alpha said, approaching Will, and the sudden closeness was as welcome as it was destabilizing, and Will swayed even more on his feet. "Are you alright?"

"No," he mumbled, because he wasn't. He was drowsy, drunk and, unless he was mistaken, a bit horny. He'd spent the last thirty-something minutes sipping drinks and admiring the way the candlelights reflected in Hannibal's eyes and cast shadows under his sharp jaw. It appeared to have had an effect. Jesus. Hannibal's hand slipped across his back and settled in the curve of his waist to steady him. He felt his own breath stutter and sent the alpha a mildly chastising look. "And you're still being so careless."

"Whatever do you mean?" Hannibal sounded gentlemanly as ever, but was definitely smirking now. Will scoffed, but allowed himself to be led towards the doors.

The air, which had seemed so cold earlier, didn't bother him in the slightest now that he had liquid fire coursing through his veins. Hannibal paused to put on a pair of gloves he'd kept in

his pocket. Will watched him quietly, patiently, until he was done. Hannibal calmly held out his arm and gave Will a patient look. Without much hesitation – a second or two, at the most – Will stepped closer to slip his hand into the bend of Hannibal's elbow. It was only because he was drunk and unsteady on his feet, he told himself. They started walking.

"Think the party'll be over once we get back?" Will didn't ask because he was genuinely curious – he just wanted to have something to talk about; pretend he was feeling completely fine, and completely normal. But he was very aware of the added warmth Hannibal's proximity brought him. The faint scent of Hannibal's leather gloves, his aftershave. And of course, the bergamot.

Will took deep, slow breaths, enjoying the way that scent steadied him.

"It's only eleven thirty. I imagine it's still ongoing." Hannibal sent Will a glance. "We can retire for the night if you don't feel up to it."

Will nodded, digesting the information with some difficulty. The alcohol was hitting him a bit harder now that they were outside.

"I think-…" He faltered, searched for his words. "That heading back to our suite might be our best course of action. I'll embarrass the hell out of you if we return."

"How, exactly?" Hannibal was amused, Will could tell from his tone. He decided to latch onto that humor. Anything to distract him from the oddness of it all. How strangely at peace he felt, walking next to Hannibal so late at night.

"Oh, it's bad," Will gave Hannibal a mock-sincere look, though he felt a smile tugging at his lips. "Alcohol brings out my alter ego. He's horrible. *Extremely* rude. One time, he left a table without asking to be excused." Will paused to shake his head. "Caused an uproar."

"He really does sound awful," Hannibal agreed, glancing at Will with a smirk.

"Right? And since I made such an *impeccable* impression earlier, it'd be a shame to ruin it now." He let out a soft laugh. Hannibal hummed.

"The everlasting tug-of-war between the persona and the shadow."

"Oh, wow," Will raised an eyebrow at Hannibal. "You're quoting Jung to me right now? How drunk are *you* ?"

"You have to agree, it's rather appropriate," Hannibal mused, sounding thoughtful. Will scoffed, shaking his head gently.

"If a little on the nose."

"You did tell me I'm predictable," Hannibal sent him an amused glance. Will, whose mood was still pleasantly boosted from the alcohol, gave him a crooked, lazy smile in return.

“I’m a mess because I’m *drunk* . That Irish coffee really packed a punch.” Will looked away, still smiling, though his good mood dipped ever so slightly. “Though you’d probably say my shadow is the omega.”

He could see Hannibal glancing at him through his peripheral vision.

“... And your persona-”

“The beta. Yeah.” Will huffed, trying to reach for the defensive anger he knew was accessible to him, but finding himself unable to hold onto it. “Like I said - on the nose.”

“If the shoe fits.”

“Christ. You’re not holding back tonight, are you?” Will sent the alpha a mildly offended look. Hannibal looked back at him with a more serious expression now, though his eyes were still gentle.

“I didn’t say much. That was your analysis.” Will looked away from him and they walked together in a somewhat tense, but contemplative silence for a few moments, before Hannibal spoke up again. “And it was inadequate.”

Will glared briefly at the ground, but couldn’t stop himself.

“Yeah? How so?”

“The omega isn’t your shadow. It’s your *self* . The most genuine form of you. Your true nature.” Hannibal smiled at Will when he looked up at him. Eyes full of gravity and warmth. “The only way to embrace that is to consciously come to terms with your personas… and your shadows.”

“Well. You’re the expert, doctor Lecter,” Will sighed, lowering his gaze once more. “So… What *are* my shadows?”

“Hard to say,” Hannibal said, but still somehow managed to make it sound as if he knew exactly what they were. “Assuming Jung was right, you have to be the one who finds them, and faces them. I can’t guide you there.”

Will contemplated this, feeling uncomfortably scrutinized.

“What about you?” He said, deciding that shifting the focus away from himself was the best course of action. “What are your shadows?” Hannibal released a soft breathy laugh.

“Perhaps I’ll tell you some day.” They gazes met, and Hannibal’s expression had a sharp kind of gentleness to it that Will found unbearably attractive. A humorous glint shone in his eyes when he continued. “When you’re ready.”

“That’s just ominous,” Will muttered, but felt his lips stretch out into a small smile, mood picking back up. “You’re clearly hiding something truly deranged from me.”

“Nothing as deranged as leaving a table without asking to be excused,” Hannibal argued, voice carrying his amusement. Then he paused. “And nothing for you to fear."

There was a warm graveness to those words. Something about the vague emphasis on the word ‘you’, as if Hannibal had meant to say that Will was an exception; that he was someone special. That Hannibal would let harm come to others, if it meant keeping Will safe. Will swallowed, not knowing what to say in return. The intoxication didn’t help. Thoughts tumbled around in his head, made him dizzy.

What exactly did Hannibal feel for him? The physical attraction was certainly there – yes, that had been made abundantly clear to Will. He also understood that Hannibal experienced bouts of intense instinctual compulsions, urging him to go to certain lengths to keep Will safe and content – but that was only to be expected. No one could run away from instinct. Not even Will, despite his many years of practice. You could, hypothetically, resist the pull. But the instincts were still *there* , always in the background; whispering; tugging.

Will frowned. Instincts weren’t the same as feelings. If he had to define instincts, he’d say they were pre-programmed responses pertaining to specific occurrences. They were there to ensure people fled, fed, slept, bred – kept the species alive and kicking.

Feelings, on the other hand, were something entirely different. Weren’t they? Unpredictable and untameable. Risky and illogical. And in no way were they motivated by some innate determination to ensure the survival of the species, because people did the stupidest fuckings things because of feelings. Will’s *feelings* and Will’s *instincts* had been at war for years. So it was odd, the way Will no longer felt as though his brain was constantly being fried by internal warfare. There was a ceasefire.

Will watched Hannibal’s shiny shoes move swiftly over the cobblestone pavement as they walked. Such controlled, steady steps. Appropriate, considering the alpha’s personality.

Did he wish to know what Hannibal… *felt* ?

Will suddenly wished he was sober. Or possibly much, much drunker.

What did he feel for Hannibal?

Courtships generally end in two different ways. You know that. It’s gonna be one way, or the other.

Will’s head started swimming.

Where was this headed?

What in the world had ever possessed him to accept this situation?

Christ .

Hannibal's arm was sturdy under his fingers. Thicker than Will's own arm. Every now and then, he could feel the bicep muscle move. Will felt the burn of attraction deep within his gut.

He swallowed tightly and kept his gaze low as they walked; felt his cheeks heating up, heart pounding. Not from embarrassment, nor from the alcohol.

It was the magnitude of the situation, dawning on him. Not necessarily for the first time, but still. The possibility of something… more. It was immense, frightening and the very notion made his body react in strange ways. Panic. Blood rushing. Light-headedness.

What had started out as a mildly unethical deal in his hunt for information had taken a turn for something entirely different somewhere along the way and Will was struggling to find his footing. He hadn't expected their faux courtship to actually *lead* anywhere. But it was becoming increasingly obvious to him that the courtship had, in fact, led them… *somewhere* . Somewhere vastly off course, and there was no thinking his way out of this. He couldn't run. All he could do was to fumble around in the dark, hoping Hannibal wouldn't steer them off a cliff.

"Is everything alright? You're suddenly very quiet." Hannibal's tone was soothing. Will wished they could have kept the humorous mood going just a little longer.

"Mm. Cold."

"We're almost there."

Hannibal hugged Will's arm tighter against his body in a possibly subconscious effort to keep Will warm. And Will couldn't help but to relish in the alpha's attempts to shield him from the discomforts of the world – to keep him content. All the years of fending for himself, of being alone, were distinctly felt now that someone suddenly gave a fuck. Nobody ever gave a fuck. He never got treated like this. And a couple of months ago, he would have insisted that he preferred it that way.

Now, he wasn't so sure.

Will was not sober. He knew that, and he knew that he may have looked upon the situation differently, had he not been. Defensive, angry, prone to jumping to hasty conclusions. He didn't need to be coddled, babied, like some little-

But this didn't feel like coddling. It didn't feel like babying.

It felt like caring.

Will carefully pressed his forehead against the rough fabric of Hannibal's upper sleeve, a move that was full of approval and affection – though Will was only half-aware that he was doing it. He was, however, very aware of how good it felt to be close.

All of a sudden, a whoosh of warm air ruffled Will's hair up and he realized Hannibal had already guided him through the hotel's entrance. The foyer was brightly lit, forcing Will to

squint for a bit. He was still tipsy, but not so much that he couldn't think straight. Hannibal searched his gaze for a bit.

"How are you feeling?"

"M'fine," Will managed. "Just tired."

"Then we should head back to our suite. I'd like to bid our hosts goodnight first."

"Sure. Tell them I said goodnight, too." Will took a seat in one of the expensive armchairs that were placed strategically throughout the room. "I'll wait here."

"If you're sure?"

"I'm sure. Just don't take too long, or I might fall asleep in this chair, and you'll have to *carry* me back to our rooms."

"Yes, and that would simply be terrible," Hannibal drawled with a smirk before he headed back into the large hall where the vernissage was still very much on-going. Will noticed the music had changed into a faster kind of techno, and it was much louder than before. Were people *dancing* in there? He shuddered to even consider it. He relaxed into the chair and released a sigh.

The fresh air, the hamburger – which had cost much more than what Will normally paid for hamburgers, by the way – and the bourbon had served to chase away most of the anxiety that Will had suffered earlier and it left him feeling pleasantly spent and warm. He suspected that Hannibal's company and undivided attention may have served to improve his mood as well, but he still wasn't too keen to dwell on what that meant.

Will suppressed a yawn and leaned back, allowing himself to relax a bit while he was waiting, when all of a sudden, Bruce came storming out of the hall, closely followed by Sebastian. Will sat up straighter, but they didn't seem to notice him. Bruce's cheeks were flushed, and though Will initially assumed the alpha was drunk, it seemed the color stemmed from anger.

"Unbelievable!" He dragged a hand across his buzzcut, his other hand clutching his phone tightly. The pair placed themselves further into the foyer, close to a section where restrooms and coat racks could be found. Will tried his best to not listen in, but Bruce was upset and loud, and it seemed like they hadn't realized he was there.

"Calm down." Sebastian's voice was low and soothing and Will couldn't help but glance over to where the pair was standing.

"Don't tell me to calm *down* !" Bruce slammed his free hand into the wall, voice turning into a snarl on the last word. Will flinched at the sound. Bruce had appeared so mild-mannered before – was this what he was like when no one was watching?

"You're unraveling," Sebastian said, having situated himself a few steps away from his alpha,

hands in his pockets. “Five deep breaths, remember?”

“You know who’s gonna take the blame for this?” Bruce held his phone up in front of Sebastian. “ME! Because that worthless piece of shit wouldn’t listen-”

“I know.”

“You don’t KNOW! God, Sebastian, stop talking like that! Stop talking like I’m just a kid throwing a tantrum, because my boss is going to have my ass when I get back and it’s all because Devon can’t tell the difference between a corporate agreement and a-“

“Yeah. I know. And it’s not your fault.” Sebastian took a step closer. Will blinked. There was something very calculated about that step. Sebastian wasn’t just moving on a whim. There was a purpose behind that move. There was tactic.

Will inhaled deeply. Nectarine?

“Four days!” Bruce gave a sharp, joyless laugh. “Four days was all I wanted, so that we could come here and see your family and we could… just…” He trailed off with a frustrated groan.

“I know.” Another step. Sebastian’s hands were still in his pockets. His white hair looked as though it was glowing under the lamps. His gaze was steady and concentrated. Will’s bemusement turned into awe, suddenly struck by the feeling that he was witnessing something astounding.

The scent of nectarine got stronger and Bruce heaved a shuddering, exhausted sigh. That appeared to be the signal that Sebastian had been looking for, because he immediately approached his mate and tucked his head under Bruce’s chin in an affectionate nuzzle.

It looked as though every single bit of tension literally drained out of the alpha, who soon brought his arms around Sebastian’s form in a tight embrace.

“I’m so fucking tired,” Bruce mumbled against his mate, barely audible.

“Yeah. I know, babe.” Sebastian straightened up a bit, dragging his jaw against Bruce’s in an effort to mingle their scents together. Bruce sighed heavily against the smaller man and buried his face against Sebastian’s neck, while Sebastian’s hands ran comforting circles over his back.

Will watched the pair with something akin to awe for a minute.

It hadn’t occurred to him that the dynamic between an alpha and omega could look like that. He wasn’t even sure what to call it at first. He didn’t understand why he was so dumbstruck by the pair, until Sebastian locked eyes with him over Bruce’s shoulder.

Will stared at Sebastian, too dumbstruck – and possibly too tipsy – to try and hide his amazement.

Sebastian gave Will a sad sort of half-smile, running soothing fingers over Bruce's neck. The look in his eyes communicated to Will that this sort of thing probably happened often with the two of them. Will remembered the bitter comment Sebastian had made earlier, about how alphas tended to be burdened with more responsibility than others. Will knew, of course, that that was true. There was plenty of research indicating such patterns, so he was certainly aware of it – but this was the first time he'd come face to face with the consequences of it.

And there was Sebastian, picking up the pieces; comforting his unstable alpha.

Something loosened up within Will. Warmth settled in him, and he returned the smile with a careful nod, before turning his gaze away, wanting to give the pair a bit of privacy.

Hannibal returned shortly and the two walked over to the elevators, pretending not to notice the hugging couple further into the foyer, nor the scent of nectarine which still clung to the air around them. Will inhaled deeply. Felt the scent nudge something to life inside him. Pride. Strength.

The elevator ride to their floor was silent, but not uncomfortably so.

"Again, you are quiet," Hannibal mused as they stepped inside their suite. "If something is troubling you, I trust you'll let me know."

"I'm fine," Will said, loosening his tie and undoing the top buttons on his shirt. "I just… saw something pretty great."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

The alpha nodded slowly, not prodding for details, instead slipping his hands into his pockets.

"Are you too tired for a night cap?" Hannibal nodded towards the minibar and Will cocked an eyebrow.

"Trying to get me drunk again, doctor Lecter?"

"Perhaps." Hannibal's eyes lit up with amusement for a brief second. "You're very honest when you drink. And carefree."

"Oh, believe me," Will gave a low chuckle, "I care. About many things. Overthink stuff until… Until everything stops making sense."

Hannibal approached the minibar and found two glasses. He then browsed through the collection of small bottles until he apparently found a beverage worthy of consumption. Will watched Hannibal's back as the alpha poured liquid into the glasses and gave an amused scoff when Hannibal handed him one of them.

"Don't blame me if I'm hungover and moody tomorrow." He took a sip from the glass and

realized it was brandy.

“How brave of you to drink what I serve you without first asking what it is,” Hannibal drawled, taking a sip from his own glass. “I suppose that means you’ve begun to trust me.”

“I suppose I have.”

Hannibal stilled briefly, as though he was surprised by Will’s matter-of-factly response. Will was, too. He felt the warmth of embarrassment settle in his cheeks and he turned away from the alpha, opting instead to walk close to the enormous windows, which provided them with an excellent view over the city. At night, it was certainly a sight to behold – thousands of streetlamps and lit up skyscrapers, creating the illusion of a starry sky.

Will felt, rather than heard, Hannibal approach him from behind. The alpha placed himself next to him, close enough for Will to smell the bergamot, feel the static between their bodies. He longed for Hannibal’s hand on his back, wanted to feel strong digits run up and down his spine, but he doubted he’d ever be drunk enough to actually *ask* for that sort of attention. He cleared his throat, kept his gaze on the streetlights below.

“Remember the book you lent me?”

“Of course.”

“I read it. All of it.” Will sent Hannibal a look, which was returned with a curious smile.

“And?”

“I’ll admit, it made me see certain things in a new light,” he said, sending Hannibal a grateful smile. “So… thanks.”

“That dissertation was something of a revelation to me, the first time I read it,” Hannibal admitted, gazing out over the city. “I was hoping it’d be the same for you.”

“Is that why you hold omegas in such high regard?” Will asked. “You never say a bad word about them. I mean… *us* .” He paused for a moment. “Most of the people I grew up with had bad things to say.”

Hannibal sent him a look but didn’t prod Will for more details, and Will was grateful for that.

“I credit some of it to my studies, yes. But I’ve never thought of omegas as inferior. I assess people based on their character.” Hannibal took another swig from his glass. “I’d like to think that’s what made me choose the psychiatric field. The other medical fields are far too concerned with biology. *Minds* are far more fascinating.”

Will swallowed the lump that had begun forming in his throat and took in the sight outside the window, weighing his words carefully.

“I think I’ve judged people based on their biology my whole life,” he finally admitted.

“Ah. Past tense? That’s good.”

“It is.” Will nodded solemnly, turning his gaze back towards the shimmering city. “This trip… aside from everything that went wrong today,” he felt the corners of his mouth curve into a soft smile, “really has been eye-opening. Well done, doctor.”

“Glad to have been of help,” Hannibal looked over at him, smiling. “Any particular insights you’d like to share?”

“Well,” Will started, inhaling deeply to steady himself. “I’ll admit you made some good points earlier tonight. Could be the alcohol talking, though.”

“You seemed very confident back there.”

“I’m never very confident,” Will said, far more honest than he would’ve normally preferred to be. “I just did whatever I thought… someone confident would do.”

“Confidence takes practice,” Hannibal pointed out. “It’s not necessarily some innate quality we’re born with. And mimicking others can be a good place to start.” Hannibal sent him a look. “I certainly thought it was convincing.”

“Yeah, you looked like it,” Will said, sending the alpha a boldly sly smile. It softened when he recalled what he’d just witnessed in the foyer. Sebastian and Bruce. Will had already been in awe of them when they initially met; the playful banter, the familiarity, the loving touches, the obvious and immensely deep sense of mutual *care* that they both exuded. If Will had been a romantic, if he had ever given any thought to how he would’ve liked a marital bond to look like, that would’ve probably been it. He thought of the way Sebastian’s hand had curled around Bruce’s knee. He thought of the way Sebastian had managed to calm Bruce with his mere scent and closeness. “But there were other things, too.”

Perhaps it was the softening of his expression, or the way he shifted his body so that he stood a bit closer to Hannibal - Will wasn’t exactly sure what it was that he *did* that made Hannibal respond. But Hannibal’s hand came up to stroke gently over his back, as if he’d somehow heard Will’s unspoken invitation. And when Will didn’t flinch away or send the alpha a glare, the way he so often had, the touch firmed. It settled there, against the curve of Will’s spine, as if it belonged. Will felt like it belonged.

“Other things?”

“Mm.” Will swallowed. “Things I hadn’t considered before. Things that…” He inhaled, trying to steady himself as his pulse picked up. “Made me rethink what an omega *is* to an alpha.”

What I could be to you, Will didn’t say. But it was like Hannibal was attuned to him now, because the alpha shifted closer and Will felt a seductive surge of longing throughout his entire body at the increased closeness.

“Care to elaborate?” Hannibal’s voice was coming out lower and slightly rougher now. Will wondered if he, too, noticed the way their scents mingled when they were standing this close together. It made him shiver.

“Anchor,” Will said, because that’s the only word he could think of. “Omegas are anchors. I always used to think…” He shook his head, and put his drink away on one of the side tables. “It doesn’t matter. I was wrong.”

“It does matter.” Hannibal put his glass away, too. Will took his time gathering the nerve to say what he needed to say. Hannibal’s thumb drew distracting circles against his spine.

“I used to think that if I ever… wound up with an alpha,” he said, not brave enough to actually utter the word ‘bond’, “that I’d be giving up my freedom. My sense of self. That I’d be forced to go along with anything, that I’d turn into some meek little *servant* , and that I’d be treated as if I’m-” he cut himself off, noticing the way he’d started to ramble. He looked up at the alpha, pushing as much genuinity as he could into his expression. “But I was wrong. It doesn’t have to be like that.”

Hannibal looked back at him, eyes serious and filled with a vague sort of astonishment, and Will noticed - with a thrill dancing up his spine - the way those eyes seemed to darken as they darted down to Will’s lips.

“No,” Hannibal agreed, and the hand on Will’s back pressed firmer, stroking around to Will’s waist. “It doesn’t.”

“You don’t have to call all the shots,” Will said quietly, turning in Hannibal’s embrace. “I can make decisions, too."

What’s happening?

“Well, then. What do you want to do?” Hannibal asked, voice coming out low and husky now. Will swallowed, which was oddly challenging with the way his pulse hammered in his throat. Will reached up to place his hands on Hannibal’s chest - not to push away, but to touch.

What are you doing?

Hannibal’s breath came faster now. It was controlled, but definitely faster. Will swallowed tightly, didn’t dare look up. He kept his eyes firmly on his own fingers, currently spread out over Hannibal’s silk-clad chest. He watched as they inched upwards, as if he wasn’t the one in control of them, and eventually they encircled the nape of Hannibal’s neck. Hannibal’s hands lowered, landing on Will’s hips. The alpha inclined his head, gently nudging Will’s temple with his lips, and inhaled softly.

“God, the scent of you…” The tone of Hannibal’s voice was *hungry* , and his hands tightened on Will’s hips, and Will was almost startled by how eagerly his body responded to it. With those words, Hannibal effectively broke any lingering illusion they might have still been under that whatever this was, was merely an exchange of services, a deal they’d struck, or

some experimental form of therapy. It was the first time since the time they had dinner together, that Hannibal had addressed his attraction to Will. It was the very first time he'd addressed it directly. And by God, Will wanted to hear it. He wanted to hear it all.

"Yeah?" Will's throat clicked as he swallowed.

"Give some of it to me," Hannibal's voice rumbled out of him, like low thunder, and Will's breath stuttered as an electric shock of possessiveness made his chest clench. He tilted his head back and leaned up, pressing his jaw against Hannibal in a languid, achingly slow move. He wanted to savor the way his skin dragged against Hannibal, wanted to soak up as much of Hannibal's scent as he possibly could. Wanted to make sure Hannibal carried his.

But it wasn't enough. He wasn't sure how it happened. He didn't know what possessed him to do it. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he did it. Will leaned up, his grip on Hannibal's neck tightening, and slanted their mouth together in a soft, careful kiss.

The touch of Hannibal's lips against his own tingled and seared, and Will couldn't help but to do it again – harder this time. Hannibal's hands clamped down on Will's hips, pulled him closer, while their mouths opened against one another to let tongues meet. Will let out a soft sigh at the sensation, allowing himself to actually relish, for just a few seconds, in Hannibal's embrace.

The cruelty of his past would, undoubtedly, bring him back to earth soon enough. Until then, he wanted to enjoy being close to Hannibal. Wanted to push the limits of how far he'd let himself go…

Will's back made contact with the window when Hannibal pressed into him, slowly, carefully. Will draped his arms around Hannibal's neck as the kiss deepened, eyelids fluttering shut in bliss as Hannibal's hands dragged up and down his sides, and pulled Will closer.

His eyes flew open in shock as the evidence of their arousal met through the fabrics of their pants. He hadn't even registered that he'd reached that stage - he'd been too preoccupied with Hannibal's lips to really notice. Hannibal's hardness pressed against his own, sending shocks of mind-numbing pleasure through Will. He gasped against Hannibal and desperately wanted to grind back, desperately wanted to chase that pleasure, give himself up to it.

But there it was. The cruelty of his past.

"Wait-" Will gasped, pressing his hand against Hannibal's chest. "Stop!"

The shrill note of panic in his voice proved effective. Hannibal stilled immediately, though remained looming over Will with a hand planted on the glass of the window just above Will's head.

For a minute or two, they merely breathed – collecting themselves before slowly retreating. Hannibal cleared his throat and dragged a hand through his hair, fixing a few loose strands in place. Will fixed the collar of his shirt, keeping his gaze low. He felt awful. Shame burned in

him, reddening his skin.

Not necessarily the kind of shame he would normally associate with this – no, this time, he felt ashamed because he had put an end to something that they had clearly both been enjoying. And for what, exactly?

“I’m sorry,” he breathed, leaning his head back against the cool glass, though his gaze remained low. “It’s not… Your fault. I’m just-“

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” Hannibal said. Will looked up at him, still feeling apprehensive. Hannibal gave him a comforting, gentle half-smile and reached up to put a stray lock of Will’s hair in place. “And there’s no need to rush.”

Will nodded, but his heart sank when Hannibal moved away from him, immediately disliking the alpha’s increasing distance. He reached out, without thinking, and grabbed Hannibal’s arm. The alpha stopped and gave him a quizzical look. Will turned his face away with an embarrassed sigh.

“Don’t… I mean, I don’t want you to... I still want you close.”

“Fine,” Hannibal said, and the tone suggested he was somewhat amused by the situation. “Then how about we sit down for a bit, before we go to bed?” He gestured to the sofa.

Will nodded, grabbing his glass of brandy, and opted to stay quiet as he took a seat. Hannibal followed his example. For a few minutes, they merely sat next to one another. Eventually, Will gathered the courage to lean his head against Hannibal’s shoulder. Through drowsy eyes, Will regarded the glimmering lights outside the window. The fatigue, lingering arousal and the effects of the brandy made him feel dazed.

“Hannibal?”

“Hm?”

“What do I smell like?”

Hannibal considered the question for a moment, his hand coming up to rest on Will’s thigh. The touch felt nice. Intimate, but not too daring. Just what he needed. Hannibal probably knew that.

“Difficult to pin-point. There’s something sugary, like rich caramel. And a hint of whiskey.”

Will raised an eyebrow at that and chuckled softly against Hannibal’s upper arm.

“Like an Irish coffee. I had one of those earlier, remember?”

“I do remember, yes.” There was an amused timbre to his voice. “And you didn’t have one. You had three.”

“Oh.”

“Mm.”

“Are we sure that’s what I actually smell like, or could it be a side-effect of my drinking habits?”

“Interesting notion.” Hannibal paused. “Though I should point out that if Irish coffees affected me the way you affect me, I would've likely been the one ordering three of them tonight.”

Will let out a soft scoff at that, but secretly relished in hearing Hannibal talk about the way he was affected by Will. Pride and satisfaction simmered to life in him. Another minute went by.

“Should I tell you what you smell like?” Will glanced over at the alpha, then frowned briefly as he remembered that Hannibal had courted before. That little piece of knowledge sat uncomfortably in his chest. “But I suppose... you must already know.”

“Bergamot, I’ve been told.” Hannibal returned his look, looking mildly rueful, as if he regretted having to confirm what Will suspected. “Or something along those lines.”

Will frowned.

“Just bergamot?”

“Once or twice I’ve been told there’s a hint of green tea, as well.”

“And steel?”

Hannibal stared at him for a few seconds, facial expression tightening a fraction.

“Steel?”

“Yeah. I’ve always thought you smell like a nice blend of those three things: Bergamot, green tea, and steel.” Will yawned. After a few seconds, he frowned again. “Which is odd now that I think about it. Steel doesn’t seem like a smell, does it? It’s just whatever comes to mind when we’re close sometimes. It’s not always there. Which is also a little odd.” The alcohol was definitely getting to him now, he realized. He wasn’t making sense. “Point is,” he said, more firmly, and brushed his fingers over the hand that was still resting on his thigh. “I like it.”

Hannibal didn’t answer, but his thumb stroked soothingly over Will’s kneecap. Hannibal’s thumbs often did that; stroked and soothed and comforted. Soon, he fell asleep.

Hannibal watched the omega drift away. His expression softened briefly at the sight, before tightening again. Carefully, Hannibal stood and went to collect his cell phone and his unfinished glass of brandy. Will’s advances had quite frankly caught him completely off

guard – though the kiss was certainly *very* welcome – and he felt the need for some alcohol to steady himself.

He was constantly thrown between enjoying the way the mystery of Will Graham slowly unraveled right in front of him, and disliking the way this made him have to constantly reach for his control.

"Remember what happened to Icarus." Bedelia's words warned. Hannibal grimaced at the memory.

Predominantly, the way he felt about this omega was a pressing issue. The fact that there *were* , in fact, feelings involved at all.

Hannibal corrected his neck-tie as he threw a glance to the sleeping omega.

He'd known from the start that he *wanted* Will, the way he might have felt collecting a rare piece of art or solving an exceptional riddle - there was satisfaction and pride involved in those - but what he felt for the man now far succeeded the normal vague possessiveness he'd felt with previous partners. More than the satisfaction of being compatible.

Will Graham was a goddamned force of nature.

Will Graham sometimes looked as if he saw right through Hannibal.

Will Graham thought he smelled like steel.

Hannibal watched the younger man sleep for a few more seconds before sitting back down, carefully, so as to not wake Will up, and logged onto his phone to scroll through the news sites, idly sipping on his brandy.

Eventually, he came across a headline that made him pause, a troubled scowl twisting his features.

He looked over to Will's sleeping form, resisting the urge to reach over and drag his hand through Will's hair. He didn't want to risk waking the man up.

The omega needed the rest. The next few days weren't going to be easy.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed!

Calm

Chapter Notes

:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will woke up right where he'd fallen asleep the night before – on the couch, gently tucked in with a blanket and a pillow that he assumed Hannibal had collected from his bedroom. The hangover made itself known as he sat up, but it wasn't the worst one he'd experienced by far, and he estimated that two cups of coffee would likely be enough to chase most of it away.

Yawning, he looked around for Hannibal. The alpha wasn't in the room.

"Hannibal?" Will croaked, clearing his throat. That's when he heard the shower turn on in the bathroom and he sank back down on the couch with a sigh. His gaze made its way over to the large windows and the bright world outside, and he frowned in dismay. Will preferred the night, with the glittering lights. Looking at them, with Hannibal. That had been nice. Kissing Hannibal. *Very* nice. Hannibal pressing him against those windows and-

Ah, yes. Memories of the previous night made themselves known and Will swallowed tightly, curling into himself as his body heated up. Embarrassment, as well as the lingering longing for closeness, made Will's head swim.

He'd kissed Hannibal. *He* , Will Graham, had taken the initiative and kissed Hannibal Lecter. And it felt good. Right. Addictive. He wasn't sure if he could blame it on the preheat, no matter how much he wanted to.

Will sat back up and started looking around for his iPad. When he realized it had been left in his bedroom, he gave a groan of irritation. The hangover left him in *no* mood to walk all the way over to his room and collect the device, so he remained seated in a slouched position on the couch, glaring at the morning sun outside. Too bright. Too noisy. He realized that they would need to head back to the airport shortly, and he absolutely dreaded the prospect of going outside, into all of *that* . People. Cars. Sounds.

The shower turned off in the bathroom, and Will perked up. Like a puppy hearing the approaching footsteps of his master outside the door. He turned to look towards the bathroom, and when Hannibal emerged, Will's heart immediately started working harder. The man was naked, save from a white towel around his hips. Drops of water clung to Hannibal's hair. Good god almighty.

“You’re awake,” Hannibal noted as he met Will’s gaze, and made no effort to cover himself up. “Would you like some coffee?”

It took Will a couple of seconds to remember how to speak.

“Yes,” he managed. “Coffee. Good. Coffee would be good.” He draped the blanket tighter around himself and gave an unsteady smile, pretended not to notice the way the muscles in Hannibal’s lower abdomen moved as the man walked over to the bar, pretended even harder not to notice the way it made him *feel* . Will tucked his head down and glared at the floor while he listened to Hannibal preparing the coffee machine, getting cups out of the little cupboard.

“We should leave earlier so that we can get you a new suitcase,” Hannibal commented. “And maybe some comfortable clothes for you to wear on the flight.” He sent Will a little smirk. “Because we wouldn’t want to compromise your comfort.”

“Sure,” Will concurred, voice subdued.

“Are you feeling okay? No hangover?”

“Headache,” Will admitted.

Hannibal immediately went into his own room and Will heard him rummage around in there before the alpha returned, with a small jar of the little pills Will had gotten so upset about the night before. Will gave Hannibal a tentative look, before carefully taking the pill from Hannibal’s palm, letting his fingers linger against Hannibal’s skin for a moment longer than necessary.

“Thank you.”

Hannibal gave him a warm look and handed over a water bottle.

“Wash it down with this. The coffee will be ready in a minute.”

Will only nodded before obeying, throwing the pill into his mouth and taking a sip from the bottle. Will felt himself relax. The brightness from the sun didn’t irk him quite as much as it had just a few minutes ago.

He remained seated and quiet on the couch, listening to the coffee machine’s gurgling, while Hannibal returned to his bedroom to get dressed. When he finally did summon the energy to go into his room and retrieve his tablet, which he found on his nightstand, he found that it was dead. No matter. His hygiene took priority anyway, and he managed to make his way over the bathroom, which was still steamy and warm from Hannibal’s shower. He undressed and got inside the shower cabin, sighing in relief as the warm water washed over him, easing up tension in his shoulders, while the pill Hannibal had given him did its job and chased the headache away.

One he got out, he practically felt like a new man, though he soon realized that the only fresh change of clothes he had was the cheap H&M t-shirt he'd meant to sleep in. Hannibal's suggestion to buy some new clothes before they went to the airport was definitely a good idea. Will realized he'd never actually called the reception to ask whether it was possible to get his laundry done - the sweatpants he'd worn the day before, which Hannibal blatantly disapproved of and still carried traces of his sandalwood scent blocker, were still tightly wrapped up in a plastic bag at the foot of the bed. He'd simply have to clean them at home.

He draped a bathrobe around himself before he got out of the bathroom. Hannibal was in the process of pouring coffee for the both of them as Will approached and the alpha, now dressed in a casual pair of chinos and matching button-up shirt, sent him a smile. He handed one of the cups over to Will, who immediately brought it to his lips with a content sigh.

"Perfect," Will sighed in satisfaction, having thoroughly enjoyed the first sip. "Thank you, Hannibal. This is just what I needed." He looked up at the alpha with a grateful smile, and noticed, not for the first time but with more awareness than before, the effect his words had on the older man. Hannibal's shoulder seemed to relax a bit, minute traces of tension drained out of him, and something proud and content settled in the alpha's features.

Will took another sip, sighing with equal satisfaction as the first time, and lingered close to the alpha, though facing the windows.

"Guess we should get going soon?"

"Yes, preferably as soon as possible. We don't know what the traffic is going to be like, but I imagine it's going to be quite busy."

"Right, give me a minute to get changed. And I need to charge my pad."

"You could charge it on the plane," Hannibal suggested, one hand casually tucked in his pocket. "We have errands to run and a flight to catch."

"Fine, okay," Will nodded and chugged the rest of the coffee as he walked over to his bedroom and collected the clothes he'd purchased the day before. He then headed back to the bathroom to collect the dark blue suit pants, because although he'd slept in them and were slightly wrinkled, they still looked nicer than the slacks. Combined with the white H&M t-shirt, Will deemed himself appropriately dressed. Not as appropriate as Hannibal, of course, but definitely appropriate. Hannibal seemed to think so, too, because the look he gave Will when he emerged fully dressed was rather pleased. At least there was no disdainful wrinkle on his forehead.

After another couple of minutes, Will was throwing his belongings into the plastic bag he'd received at the dry cleaners the day before in one hand, and the H&M bag in his other hand. Hannibal gave him a flat look.

"We definitely need to buy you a new suitcase."

"Yeah, yeah, snobby," Will snorted half-heartedly. They exchanged long-suffering looks,

though their eyes glinted with withheld amusement, and together they exited the room and headed down to the reception to check out.

Hannibal had been right – the traffic was insufferable, even for a Sunday morning. He glanced over to Will, who sat next to him in the taxi with an expression of grim determination. The omega disliked crowds, Hannibal knew that, and here he was, bravely trying to prepare himself for the stressful situation he was undoubtedly going to find himself in within a few minutes. Hannibal reached over to carefully stroke his knuckles over Will's thigh. The younger man flinched, not from fear of being touched, but surprise. Will looked over to him, ears reddening a bit as his lips curved into the soft ghost of a smile. Hannibal retracted his hand once he saw that his affectionate gesture had had the desired effect, and threw a look at his wrist watch.

"How are we doing on time?" Will's voice was still a bit husky from the hangover, and the omega cleared his throat.

"Quite well, I'd say. There'll be no need to run around."

"Good."

After another minute or so, they arrived at the dry cleaner where they had dropped off Will's clothes the day before. Hannibal went in and retrieved everything – sadly in yet another plastic bag, since there had been no saving Will's old suitcase. Which honestly didn't matter, seeing as Hannibal intended to purchase a new one for his omega anyway. The one Will had brought looked ridiculously old and worn. Hannibal suspected that Will wasn't in the habit of buying himself anything new, unless it was absolutely necessary. The cologne accident had more than one silver lining; Hannibal itched to spoil the omega. Make sure the final hours of their trip would be as pleasant as possible for Will.

He was immensely pleased to find that every trace of the sandalwood perfume he so despised had vanished from the garments, and when he returned to the taxi, Will seemed pleased, too. He picked up a black cardigan he'd brought with him and put it over the white t-shirt – with a shiver. Hannibal's eyebrows knitted together slightly and before he could stop himself, he'd already pressed the back of his hand against Will's forehead. No fever, thankfully. Will, who remained surprisingly patient throughout Hannibal's fussing, gave him a look.

"I'm okay. Just a bit cold."

"And hungover," Hannibal filled in with a smirk, leaning back into his own seat.

"M-hm." Will leaned his head back against the headrest, closing his eyes. "God, I could kill for another cup of coffee."

"I could drop you off at Starbucks, if you want? There's one that's real close to upper north west," said the taxi driver. Hannibal frowned with aversion. Starbucks? The place that served

sickly-sweet coffee drinks with flavored syrup with the likely purpose of covering up how subpar the coffee actually was? Absolutely not. He was almost offended at the suggestion and was about to tell the driver no, when Will spoke up.

“That sounds great.” Will gave Hannibal a quick glance, and Hannibal thought he saw a hint of amusement glimmer in the omega’s expression. Little devil. “We just love Starbucks, don’t we? I’m dying for a Frappuccino with extra soymilk.”

Hannibal stared at his partner as though Will had begun speaking a foreign language. Will merely pressed his lips together to hide his smile and turned to look out the window. Exasperated, Hannibal accepted his fate and corrected his impeccable necktie. Was he being toyed with? Teased? He picked up notes of caramel from Will, a happy scent. The omega seemed to be in a good mood, and Hannibal realized that it had a startling effect on his own mood.

And he was intent on savoring it while it lasted.

Hannibal was glad Will had taken his advice to charge the device later. The younger man still hadn’t had the chance to check the news, and Hannibal was not about to tell him what was going on in Baltimore. Not yet. He didn’t want the omega’s morning ruined; he’d already been through enough. An odd ache settled in Hannibal’s chest, and he recognized it as concern. It was uncomfortable, and difficult to shake. He straightened his posture in an effort to regain some focus, but when he turned to look at Will, he found the younger man staring right back at him.

Will’s eyes were scrutinizing, searching. Tentatively, the omega reached out to mimic the affectionate brushing of knuckles that Hannibal had given him earlier. The touch was so soft, so hesitant, that Hannibal might not have noticed it if he hadn’t been looking.

“You okay?”

Hannibal Lecter prided himself on being a man who never hesitated, never stumbled or let himself get thrown by the actions of others, but now, he found himself at a loss for words.

Will had noticed. The same seemingly effortless way Will had picked up on his bad mood the day before. Like he somehow sensed the vague emotional imbalance Hannibal experienced - and worked hard to keep hidden. And just like the day before, Hannibal didn’t know exactly what he’d done - what minor shifts and symptoms had rippled the surface, what cracks he’d left in the wall - that apparently left him so open to the omega. Was Will simply *that* unnervingly observant? Or was this… something entirely different?

Hannibal managed to keep his composure, nod and smile.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Will returned the smile, letting the tips of his fingers linger on Hannibal’s leg for a moment, before retreating and leaning back in his seat. The scent of caramel was almost overwhelming now and Hannibal felt himself relax, more and more, though the concern

remained in the back of his mind.

Will *would* eventually find out what had happened, and it *would* upset him. But until then, they would enjoy a nice morning together and Hannibal would drink a sickly-sweet coffee drink with flavored syrup for Will's affectionate entertainment, because he wanted, desperately, for as long as possible, if only for a few more hours, to keep his omega happy.

As they boarded the plane, Will's mood was at a peak. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at peace, so calm, and the hangover was completely cured. The taste of artificial vanilla lingered on his tongue, but it had been worth it. Will didn't particularly enjoy Starbucks, but rather found it amusing that they'd found so many ways to ruin a perfectly good beverage – it had just been too tempting, when the taxi driver suggested dropping them off there, to turn it down. He knew Hannibal would rather shoot himself in the foot than voluntarily drink one of their silly mocca-latte-frappuccino drinks, and that's what made it so damned hilarious.

The alpha had managed one full sip of his drink, which Will had been allowed to choose for him, and even managed to keep a straight face as he swallowed, though Will was fairly certain he saw a shiver of disgust dance across the alpha's shoulders. It was a memory he'd cherish forever. Will smiled in amusement as he took a seat closest to the window, with Hannibal joining him in the seat next to his.

Will was now wearing a new coat over a knitted black sweater, both of which Hannibal had insisted on buying for him, and Will had permitted it. Hannibal genuinely seemed to enjoy providing for him, and Will decided he might as well let it happen; explore how it made him feel. Normally, he would never have let anyone buy clothes for him, not even close friends - not that he had many of those, but still. The very idea made him exceedingly uncomfortable. He was a grown man, for god's sake.

But Hannibal seemed to have this *need* to ensure Will's comfort and safety, and weirdly, Will didn't mind it. After what he'd witnessed with Sebastian and Bruce, part of him wanted to explore this dynamic – wanted to let Hannibal do things for him, because it seemed to give the alpha a kind of lingering satisfaction that Will hadn't seen in the older man before.

Moreover, the preheat was looming over him like a wet, hot blanket, and he was fairly certain that it contributed to his sudden tolerance to Hannibal's overt caretaking. It made him feel safe. Cared for. Cherished.

He turned to look at the alpha, who was in the process of putting on his seat belt. Something was bothering him. Will knew, somehow, that something was bothering Hannibal, but the older man refused to admit it. It was just as frustrating as it had been the day before, but Will had decided to not press too hard this time. He hoped, though, that Hannibal would eventually tell him. Confide in him. Let himself lean back against Will a little.

Omegas are anchors.

Will leaned his head back against the headrest and, as the airplane started moving, carefully shifted his hand towards Hannibal's on the armrest between them, softly brushing his fingers against the alpha's, all the while keeping his gaze firmly on the moving scenery outside the window and trying to ignore the way his heart pounded nervously against his ribs. He didn't want to say anything – just let the alpha know that he was there, and that he was, perhaps, gradually, coming to terms with certain aspects of their arrangement.

Certain prospects. Certain possibilities.

There weren't any guarantees, but the things Will had been so adamant on ruling out before, were no longer completely ruled out. Will had realized that the very moment he pressed his lips against Hannibal's the night before. That kiss shifted the whole dynamic of their relationship and there was no going back to pretending they were just therapist and patient, or that their courtship was still just a clause in their deal.

They didn't say anything for a while. Perhaps nothing needed to be said. It wasn't until the sign that said they could unfasten their seat belts lit up and Will got up to retrieve his charger, which was now neatly placed in his new carry-on bag (that Hannibal had also insisted on purchasing for him), that Hannibal spoke.

"Will." His voice carried a trace of tension. Will plugged the charger into the outlet above their seats, connected it to the iPad, and looked over at the alpha.

"Yeah?"

A muscle in Hannibal's jaw ticked as he looked back at Will, eyes grave and cautious.

"Things have happened in Baltimore. Things that are likely going to cause you some distress."

Will stared at him, utterly confused. He felt the tension crawl up his shoulder blades, settling in his neck and shoulders. His good mood drained out of him, bit by bit, as he took in Hannibal's grim expression. Had the alpha been trying to shield him from something? Was that the tension Will had picked up? He felt a spark of irritation ignite behind his ribs.

"What are you talking about?"

Hannibal opened his mouth to speak, but he was interrupted by the 'ping' from Will's iPad, alerting its owner that it had re-awakened. They both turned to look at it for a second.

"I didn't want you to read the news this morning," Hannibal admitted, keeping his eyes averted, eyebrows drawing together. "You've been through a lot this weekend, and I wanted you to at least enjoy the last few hours before we had to leave. I was selfish."

"Hannibal, what happened in Baltimore?"

“You need to stay calm. You’re in a precarious sta-“

“What *happened* ?” Irritation turned into anger. Hannibal gave him a dark look.

“There’s been some significant development in the omega murder case.” He paused for a second before he continued, as if what he was about to say caused him pain. “It would seem that you’ve been disproven.”

Will stared at the alpha, absolutely bewildered, before grabbing the pad, logging on and accessing the airplane wi-fi. He immediately went on the news sites, pressing his fingertip aggressively against the screen, scrolling through the articles until he found the one Hannibal was undoubtedly referring to.

For a few moments, Will just gaped at the screen in shocked silence.

“This… can’t be.”

Omega murderer steps forward – alpha suspect makes full confession:
“I did it. I killed them.”

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed!

Storm

Chapter Notes

:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The silence. That's what really got to him. In all his years working with people of all ages, genders and inclinations, mental instabilities and physical prowess, Hannibal had never once felt uncertain or anxious in the presence of another person. Even when he was working with the most deranged cases, Hannibal never backed away. No matter how much effort they put into intimidating him, no matter how inferior they thought he was, because they did not know *what* he was, no matter what threats or snarls or cusses they threw at him, Hannibal never wavered.

Anxiety was as alien to him as getting a coffee at Starbucks; alas, here he was, stuck on an airplane, having been subjected to both of these alien experiences, in the span of just one morning. And the person responsible was seated right next to him.

Will had not said a word in over thirty minutes.

Hannibal sent the omega a subtle glance. Pretended to be thoroughly unbothered by the silence, the stubborn refusal to meet Hannibal's gaze, acknowledge his existence. Just like he'd pretended not to notice the way his chest pinched uncomfortably as Will dismissed him; each time he'd made an effort to seek contact for the past half hour, Will remained unresponsive, and Hannibal was, to his own great and utter dismay, starting to feel *anxious* . He wouldn't stand for it.

"Will."

The omega did not look at him. His gaze remained strictly directed at the iPad on his lap, reading everything and anything he could find on the case that Will had been so determined to solve, which had now apparently *been* solved, and the omega was angry. That much was clear to Hannibal. He could practically feel the agitation and disbelief vibrating in the air around the younger man.

"Will, don't you think you should-"

"Quiet."

Hannibal blinked as the rebuttal sent affronted tingles across his scalp. He kept his composure, despite the rage that threatened to well up in his throat. Had it been anyone else, Hannibal would have already been planning their execution in immaculate detail. He'd

ponder over which dish he'd turn the other man into, which body parts to keep and store, and which to leave, arranged in a lovely artistic display of carnage. But it was not anyone else; it was Will. So he merely cleared his throat and made sure to sound just as calm as he normally did when he spoke again.

"That's a bit rude."

"I'm trying to read."

"I think you've read all there is to read by now. It's not even been a day since he delivered himself to the police. They'll update the news when there's news to report."

Will finally turned to look at him, but Hannibal was not relieved at the sight. The omega's eyes were dark and stormy, void of affection, cold.

"Don't patronize me."

"… I'm not trying to."

"You're acting as though I'm irrational for wanting to find out what the hell's going on."

"I'm merely suggesting putting the tablet away for a few moments." Hannibal kept his voice low, hoping it would have a stabilizing effect on the omega now that Will was finally talking to him again. "Stress is the last thing you need right now. You won't be able to do anything from here anyway."

Will shook his head softly and gave a horrifyingly pale smile; the kind that the younger man would normally don when he was forced to socialize with people he had no desire to socialize with. He recognized the mask of stillness and uncomfortable politeness that slipped over the omega's face – the one he'd so often wear when they first met. Before their relationship evolved. Hannibal's chest pinched again. When Will spoke, it was with a tone of deceptive, dangerous calm.

"This was one of the most important cases of my career, one that had my professional expertise questioned, one that had me *suspended* , and you were supposed to help me-"

"Yes-"

"-but instead you flew me to Chicago so that we could go to a party together."

Will gazed into Hannibal's eyes and the alpha felt a small shiver of apprehension crawl up his back. This was decidedly different from how Will normally acted when he was upset about something. The omega would normally turn into a hissy ball of nerves that Hannibal could hold in the palm of his hand and soothe with reassuring words and alpha influence. He suspected words of comfort would have very little effect on the man he saw before him now, because Will didn't *want* to be comforted. The younger man's walls were entirely raised, impenetrable and tall.

Hannibal found himself at a momentary loss for a response, because, well, the omega wasn't wrong. To be fair, the deal they struck pertained more to finding a remedy for Will's self-hatred than anything else, but still. Hannibal had promised the younger man to assist him with the case. He'd been well aware of how imperative it was for Will to prove himself. In hindsight, removing the profiler from the scene where he was needed, for the sake of a faux courtship, had perhaps not been Hannibal's wisest move. Of course, in the light of everything that had happened, particularly Will's conviction that Jack Crawford would under no circumstances be able to find the perpetrator without his help, there really was no way Hannibal could have foreseen this turn of events. He'd been just as surprised as Will when he read the news the night before.

Hannibal suspected, though, that Will's anger stemmed from more than just their impromptu weekend trip. He watched as the omega turned back to the tablet, dragging a tired hand across his face as he read the news reports, again and again, as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

Had he been wrong? Was there a chance that Will Graham had been mistaken in his initial analysis? Will's unique and wondrous ability to enter the headspace of other people had always seemed acutely precise, even for a male omega. But then again, there was a reason Will was assigned to Hannibal in the first place. Had Hannibal overlooked something? Had his immediate curiosity and attraction to the younger man clouded his senses to such an extent that he hadn't been able to discern instabilities in Will's mental state? He didn't think it was likely, but it was not impossible. Will had been a nervous wreck, since before they got to know one another.

"I'm not wrong," Will said quietly, as though he'd read Hannibal's mind. "But that doesn't matter now. It won't matter. They have their killer. It's over."

The omega sighed and turned the device off, shoulders tense. Hannibal watched the younger man collect himself, walls inching higher.

"It wouldn't be the first time someone's made a false confession. There's still a trial," Hannibal pointed out, knowing full well his words would do little to cheer the omega up. "We don't know that he'll get convicted."

Will scoffed softly and tucked his tablet away, turning instead to gaze out the narrow window. Hannibal ordered a drink for himself and the omega as the stewardess walked by, and when the drinks arrived, Will did accept the glass Hannibal held out for him. Small mercy, Hannibal thought, as he watched the omega down the glass of whiskey in three large swigs before turning back to the window without a word.

The rest of the flight was spent in silence.

I'm not wrong.

Will wished he felt as confident as he sounded.

Was I wrong?

If so, suspending him was the right thing to do.

The thought made a knot tighten painfully in his gut. Had he actually been mistaken about this? Had Jack Crawford been right all along? Was Will even capable of doing his goddamned job? If he wasn't, then what was the point of anything? All his years of research and experience, all of his knowledge – was none of it real?

Useless.

Will gritted his teeth.

I'm fucking useless.

He closed his eyes and thought back to the crime scene. Went over every detail in his head, recalled every sensation, the emotions, the smells. Apprehensively, he attempted to apply the theory of the perpetrator being an alpha. Tried to view the scene from that headspace, from an alpha's perspective. The scene unraveled before his inner vision and he released a tight breath.

I'm not wrong.

Will was many things; unstable, a goddamned wreck, a self-loathing omega. But he was not wrong. He was never wrong. Not when it came to these matters.

He opened his eyes again and looked out the window. They were about to land. The plane descended through the clouds and the airport soon became visible below them. Will thought about what Hannibal had said, and the alpha hadn't been wrong either – false confessions did happen on occasion. If there wasn't substantial evidence that this man actually committed the crimes – which there *wouldn't* be – he would likely be charged with obstruction of justice instead, and the case would remain open. They didn't just lock up every nutcase who walked through the doors and claimed to have killed someone.

Will tried to let that thought calm him, but he also knew that Jack would fight tooth and nail to prove that he'd been right all this time. He and Will had that in common, really. The stubbornness. But while Jack was a respected alpha with a reputation of being an outstanding commander with an impeccable sense of justice, Will was generally perceived as a sickly, semi-alcoholic beta who smelled like dogs and typically lingered in the background. And, he recalled, he'd recently been publicly ridiculed by Freddie Lounds, who, despite her tendency for spreading fake news, had a rather large number of followers.

The fact that he'd just spent the entire weekend in Chicago, many, many miles away from everything that was important to him seemed unbelievable now. How the hell did he agree to this? How could he allow himself to get swept away like that? They could have dealt with his

personal issues back home. He wouldn't have had to suffer his first bouts of preheat in a goddamned hotel room, away from everything that felt familiar and safe to him.

Granted, he might've not been able to do much about the false confession, even if they'd stayed in Baltimore, but he would've at least been near-by. He wouldn't have felt so disconnected from everything.

Hannibal had taken him on this trip for Will's own sake. Hannibal had wanted him to take it easy, get the chance to meet other omegas in an environment where he didn't have to worry about bumping into anyone he knew. Hannibal couldn't possibly have known that this would happen.

Will knew all of this. And still.

It was easier to succumb to the anger.

Will wasn't known for being particularly cheerful, but the preheat made it so that he didn't even have the energy to pretend. Agitation coursed through him like black sludge. It made his fingers itch, it made him want to punch someone, and it made him want to scream.

But he was not about to cause a scene. So he kept silent, composed and distant, because that was easier than forgiving. Easier than relaxing and nodding and letting the alpha comfort him. He knew it made Hannibal uncomfortable, but he couldn't find it in him to force a smile just to appease the older man.

The plane landed and after a few minutes of shuffling through the masses, they made their way inside the airport. Will walked quickly. He wanted to get out, home. He wanted to see his dogs. He wanted to call Jack and demand to know what the hell was going on. Hannibal kept up with his pace easily, which irked Will a little, but at least the alpha was no longer prodding him to speak.

They were about to walk past an airport café when a TV screen caught Will's attention and he stopped. Hannibal stopped next to him and followed Will's gaze. Some sort of morning news show was airing, and the chyron on the lower half of the screen made it clear what the topic of discussion was.

Omega killer suspect in custody
Dr. Frederick Chilton: "Alpha instincts to blame"

Will stared intensely at the screen and moved further into the cafés seating area to be able to hear what they were saying. The blonde anchor was sitting in a blue armchair, across from a dark-haired man wearing a suit Will was sure Hannibal would find distasteful, and gestured for him to elaborate on something.

"-As I was saying," the man said, and crossed his legs in a relaxed manner, "it's important that we remember our biology."

Will was vaguely aware that Hannibal had followed him into the café and was now watching

the TV screen alongside him. The alpha released a sigh.

“Chilton… You always did love the spotlight.”

“As someone who’s worked with the criminally insane for almost two decades,” the man who was apparently Chilton continued, “I can tell you that a majority of the cases I see have, to a certain extent, been at the mercy of their own instincts. And instincts are often very difficult to resist, Carol. It’s like going against your very nature.”

“But you’re not suggesting-“

“No,” Chilton put his hands up. “I’m not at all saying we should blame the victims. Absolutely not. However, the man who is currently in custody is clearly suffering from mental instabilities, making him that much more vulnerable to his own physical, instinctive needs.”

“Right.” Carol nodded along.

“And we all know that omegas have a much stronger presence in society today; many choose not to use suppressants, even when their heat is approaching, and that, Carol, may in fact have implications for their own safety. Omega hormones, as I’m sure you know, can cloud an alpha’s judgement to such a degree that the alpha snaps and loses control.”

“You mean, of course, the pheromones an omega releases when she, or he, approaches their heat?” Carol clarified and Will flinched.

“Yes.”

“And the omegas who fell victim to this man, are there any indications as to whether they were approaching their heat or not? You’re saying that could have been a contributing factor?”

“I’m saying it’s possible, yes.” Chilton nodded slowly. “I realize it’s a bit controversial. These days we like to think we’re in control of ourselves; we like to think we’ve *evolved* . And society certainly has. But we’re still just animals, Carol. Animals with instincts.”

“Do you think we should be more lenient, then?”

“You mean, in terms of criminal charges?” Chilton asked, and Carol nodded. “Well no, not necessarily. The man who is currently in custody certainly needs to be incarcerated; no doubt he’s a danger to himself and more specifically, to others. What he’s done is irreparable and it’s left a deep wound in our community, so I’m not saying we should be *lenient* , but perhaps… sympathetic?” Chilton gave a sad sort of smile. “In a way, you could say that he’s a victim, too. A victim to his own lack of control.”

Will’s noticed how the tiled floor beneath him slowly started undulating. Sickening rage pooled in the pit of his stomach as he slowly turned away from the screen and made his way out of the café on unsteady legs.

Sympathetic .

Will covered his mouth with his hand and focused on breathing through his nose for a few seconds, waiting for the nausea to settle down.

Not only was the wrong man in custody, but people were actually pitying him?

"No. I'm not at all saying…"

Yes , Will thought bitterly. *That's exactly what you were saying.*

Hannibal approached him from behind and Will tensed up with the alpha placed a secure hand on his nape. It did nothing to comfort him. Will felt numb.

"Chilton has always had a… conservative perspective on these things," Hannibal said. "He'll face a backlash for this, I'm sure."

"How comforting," Will managed. He struggled to keep his breathing even.

"Let me take you home. You don't look well."

Hannibal's thumb made an admirable attempt to rub comforting circles over Will's skin, but nothing happened. Will couldn't feel anything. Couldn't think straight.

Memories of earlier conversations flashed before him. Conversations with Hannibal.

"*… I would ask that you don't leave my side without first letting me know where you're going. For your sake as well as mine."*

"You don't know how to protect yourself yet."

Will stared at the floor until eventually, it stopped spinning. A frightening kind of stillness came over him.

They're all the same. They're all the fucking same.

"Hannibal," he said suddenly, voice much steadier than he felt. The alpha met his gaze. "Our arrangement was for you to provide me with information on the omega killer case, in return for a courtship."

Hannibal's eyebrows knitted together minutely, but he said nothing. They stared at one another for a few tense seconds. Will watched as something hard slipped across Hannibal's sharp features, like a porcelain mask. The alpha towered over him like a statue, silent, immovable and cold. Something deep inside of Will broke at the sight, but he couldn't stop himself. Things had spun out of control. He should never have agreed to any of this.

"The case has apparently already been solved. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more

you can do for me.” He sent Hannibal a dark look. “Deal’s off.”

Without waiting for a response, Will grabbed his luggage, turned away from the alpha, and strode out of the airport, alone.

Everything inside of him screamed.

Hannibal gazed wordlessly and undramatically after the omega. Will’s slender form disappeared in the masses and left him standing there, alone. Discarded. *Him* . Hannibal Lecter. Dismissed. Rejected. Unneeded.

Nothing was silent now. People were everywhere. He’d been trapped in a beehive.

Hannibal inhaled deeply through his nose. Picked up the scents of the people passing him by. Will lingered in the air around him, but faded quickly. Too quickly.

Outwardly, Hannibal appeared as unfazed as ever. Perhaps a little tired, fresh out of a plane. Anyone taking a second look might have noticed the way his hand curled so tightly around the handle of his expensive suitcase that his knuckles were white. Perhaps they would have reacted to the way his eyes darkened, how the muscles in his jaw ticked.

Hannibal stood there for a few more minutes, wanting to make sure Will had made it off the airport before he finally collected himself and started making his way towards the exit. A man with a cellphone in one hand and a coffee cup in the other suddenly slammed into Hannibal in his rush to get to the exit before him. Splashes of cafet au lait landed on Hannibal’s jacket and the man threw an irritated glance back at him as he continued moving towards the doors.

“Watch where you’re going, asshole!”

Hannibal’s gaze followed the man as he disappeared through the doors and instantly made a turn, presumably to collect a private vehicle rather than taking a cab, much like Hannibal himself. Calmly, Hannibal pulled out a napkin and patted it across the flecks of coffee now soaking into the fabric of his jacket. He then tucked the napkin away in his inner pocket, rolled his shoulders and pivoted his head to the left until he felt a satisfying crack vibrate through the joints.

With an idle, polite smile, Hannibal walked through the exit, and steered his steps towards the garages.

By the time Will was back in Wolf Trap, his agitation had gone from bad to worse. The taxi ride had been absolute hell – though the driver was, thankfully, a beta – and he suspected his neighbor, Widow Johnson, was far from impressed when he called her up and practically barked at her that he was back and that he wanted her to drop his dogs off. The tone of her voice when she informed him that she wouldn't have time to do that until the following day told Will he'd overstepped. He'd have to apologize to her later.

His house was far too empty without the dogs. Will grunted in dismay as he frantically tore his clothes off, having thrown his luggage bag into a corner of his kitchen, and made his way into the bathroom. Shivering like he was coming down with a flu, he stepped into the shower and turned the water on. The temperature, no matter how many times he adjusted it, was wrong. Wrong. Wrong. His legs had no strength left in them, and he sank down into a kneeling position with a shuddering sigh, and eventually folded in on himself.

Spikes of dull pain danced up his spine and settled in his skull, where they remained, and worsened. Panic sparked in his chest at the sensation. Will clutched at his wet hair and released a frustrated growl. It was as though his entire being missed Hannibal. His body reacted like something had been stolen from it. Will shivered as he leaned tiredly against the wet tiles of the wall.

I left him there.

Will had been thoroughly convinced, at the time, that it was the right thing to do. That it'd make him feel better, stronger, empowered.

Instead, he felt broken in half.

But maybe it was for the best. He had never been the type to rely on others, especially not alphas. Hannibal was no damned exception. Not really. Will had just been swept off his feet, suffered a momentary albeit very serious lapse of judgement.

He was better than this. He didn't need Hannibal. He didn't need anyone.

Alphas were violent, brutal, cruel beings.

He was doing just fine. Just fine.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there when he finally came back to his senses, but the water was running cold and what little daylight the small bathroom window let through had taken on a redder tone. But he felt stable at least, and the pain had subsided a bit. It was almost with a sense of triumph that he stood up, turned the water off and wrapped a towel around his narrow hips before he exited the bathroom and retrieved his phone. It was getting late in the afternoon, but it was still BSU office hours and Will knew that Jack would be working for another three or four hours at the least.

Gritting his teeth, he dialed his commander, still clutching the towel around his shivering, half-naked form with his other hand. He wasn't really expecting the alpha to pick up, so when he did, Will practically flinched.

“ *Hey Will* ,” said Jack, tone tired, as though he’d been expecting this phone call all day.

“Jack,” Will greeted curtly. “I heard what happened.”

“ *Yeah, well, it’s all over the news, so …*”

“You got the wrong man.”

Jack released a breathy laugh at that, though it seemed mostly joyless.

“ *You know, I had a feeling you’d say that* .”

“I want to see him. Let me perform an evaluation.” Will’s heart pounded heavily in his chest as he made the request, trying his very hardest to sound as respectful as he could. Like a pup asking its leader for scraps.

“ *Will* ,” Jack groaned. “ *You know I can’t let you do that* .”

“Why not?” Will’s voice broke into something angrier. “Afraid I’m going to prove you wrong?”

“ *Not in the slightest* ,” Jack said, tone chilly. “ *We’ve already had a psychiatrist take a look at him. His initial analysis suggests we have the right guy* .”

“Chilton?”

“ *That’s right. Saw him on the news this morning?”*

“I did,” Will bit out. “He made some interesting points.”

“ *He did, indeed* ,” Jack said, sounding much too satisfied with himself. “ *In any case, I can’t let you back on until I know for certain that you’re up for it. You haven’t been cleared yet, Will* .”

“Jesus, Jack, you’re the one who insisted I take a sick leave. You’re the one convinced I’m unstable, and you can reverse it! Just let me back on the case!”

“ *That doesn’t matter now, I already made a formal report. You think I can just take those back and pretend it never happened? There’s protocol to these things. Get a grip!* ” The alpha took a breath and seemed to try his best to sound calmer when he continued.

“ *Go to therapy and get your mind sorted out. Once Dr. Bloom deems you fit for duty, I’ll take you back. You know I will. I know you think I’m trying to exclude you from something because I’m proud, but damnit Will, you’ve been unravelling for months!* ”

Will closed his eyes in frustration.

“If I go to my therapy sessions with Alana, will you let me see him?”

“ *The perp? Yeah, I’ll let you see him. If she clears you, I have no reason to doubt you’re capable of your job* .”

Will swallowed tightly and nodded, mostly to himself. Fine. If that’s what it took.

“ *When’s your first session with her anyway?”*

Will racked his brain and recalled the email he’d received just before his departure to Washington.

“Day after tomorrow,” he said, suddenly feeling reluctant. Part of him wished he’d have more time to mentally prepare himself.

“ *Alright. Good. Don’t skip out. Get better, so that you can return to us* .”

“Yeah. Bye.”

Will hung up, put the phone on the kitchen counter and then stumbled out into the living room, where he unceremoniously let himself fall face-first into the sofa.

He’d almost forgotten all about his impending therapy sessions with Alana Bloom. Will was not looking forward to it. Especially considering Hannibal had given her a whole file full of false information that Will now needed to adhere to in order for the story to make sense. His head started hurting again.

Will buried his face deeper into the cushions and tried to ignore the way he was now full-on shivering from the cold, still only clad in a damp towel. With stiff movements, he forced himself to get up and made his way to the discarded luggage bag in the kitchen, not having the energy to walk up the stairs to his bedroom to retrieve something clean to wear. He just wanted to get warm.

He opened the bag and pulled out something that made him pause in his movements, chest clenching painfully.

A plastic bag containing the world’s ugliest sweatpants.

Will pressed his lips tightly together and refused to acknowledge the salty sting in his eyes as he tugged them out, buried his nose into the fabric and inhaled.

They smelled of sandalwood and plastic. Not a trace of the alpha, despite Will having worn them in the man’s presence for several hours the day prior.

No bergamot. No green tea. No Hannibal.

Just sandalwood and plastic.

He supposed that was a good thing.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed!

Lies

Chapter Notes

:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will looked around in Alana's office with an expression of mild interest, trying his damnedest to hide his impatience, and the fluctuating sensations in his body. The bright interior of the room did little to soothe the painful pangs that came and went through his skull, forcing him to grit his teeth to keep himself from flinching.

His gaze wandered over the beige velvet curtains, the potted plants on the floor in front of the window. The framed pictures of flowers and waterfalls and other subjects that he assumed were meant to have a calming effect.

Alana sat behind her desk, typing on her computer. He'd arrived early, hoping he could get the session over and done with quicker that way, but Alana was surprisingly pedantic when it came to her schedule, so even though Will was her first patient of the day, she'd wait until the clock struck nine. Will cursed at himself. Now he was forced to sit in this room and pretend everything was fine for an additional ten minutes – his session hadn't even started yet and he was already ready to call it day, drive back to Wolf Trap, his pack, and set up camp in his bedroom.

The dogs had been delighted to see him when his neighbor graciously came over to drop them off the day before and Will had even managed to formulate some kind of apology for his rude phone call, which appeared to appease her somewhat, before she returned to her farm. Immediately after she was gone, Will almost wished she'd come back.

He loved his dogs, wouldn't give them up for anything in the world – but with the preheat constantly looming over him, and the symptoms that came with it, they were… a handful. Especially since the symptoms seemed to be getting progressively worse, ever since he'd left Hannibal at the airport.

A painful twist in his chest came with the thought of the alpha. Will hadn't thought things through that day. Blinded by his anger, too upset with the bizarre development of the case, he'd walked away from the one person that seemed to give him an ounce of relief.

But then again, alcohol did the trick, too. More or less, anyway. It left him feeling like shit, sure, but at least it allowed him to relax a little.

Relying on Hannibal felt so much like succumbing to something he didn't want to

acknowledge, something primitive that still existed in him despite all his efforts. It had felt good to be taken care of by Hannibal. Will was man enough to admit that. But that was also what made him afraid. He didn't *want* it to feel that good, letting an alpha steady him when he faltered, like a goddamned crutch.

When all is said and done, he thought, *alphas are all the same*.

If he stayed close to Hannibal, if he allowed himself to get drawn in, he'd be vulnerable – he'd be at the mercy of the older man, and Will couldn't have that. There was no telling what the alpha might do, no telling what Will would *let* him do, if he got trapped under that spell.

Still, his body was not on board with this, and it punished him for depleting it of what it wanted. He was well aware of his approaching heat – he wouldn't be able to avoid that, no matter how much distance he put between Hannibal and himself. He'd have to make a call to the hospital soon, book an appointment for induced coma. It was drastic and he'd read that it left one feeling completely lethargic, but he knew some omegas opted for that. It was better than the alternative.

Another flash of pain came and went and Will barely managed to keep his mask of light boredom in place, fingers curling slightly around the armrest of the white sofa he was seated on.

Earlier that morning, he'd managed to dig out an old bottle of cologne which had been stuffed deep into the darkest corner of his bathroom cabinet and forgotten well over two years ago. It wasn't sandalwood scented, but one that smelled of pine. Will hadn't liked that one as much – the bottle was nearly full due to the scarce use – but it was just as effective in terms of covering up his pheromones. At least he hoped it was – he hadn't checked for an expiration date, but there had been no time to head into the city to buy a new bottle. Nor did it feel safe. So he'd doused himself in the stuff, ignoring the nausea that lingered a few minutes afterwards, and hoped for the best.

In any case, Alana was a beta and he estimated that the chances of her picking up on his preheat scent through the many layers of artificial pine were minimal. She hadn't said anything, other than commenting on his early arrival and asking him to take a seat while she prepared for the session. Had she noticed, Will would have been able to tell. She wouldn't have been able to hide that from him, he reassured himself.

"Okay," Alana said as she got up from behind the desk and walked over to the armchair that was placed next to the sofa. She took a seat in it, crossing her legs and leaning forward. "Let me start by saying, I'm happy you decided to come. I know you weren't thrilled about this."

"It's not so much that I 'decided to come' – it's that I had no choice. Jack's convinced this needs to be done and he made it very clear that he won't let me come back unless you say it's okay." Will added a shrug and a smile he hoped looked genuine. "I find it all a bit overdramatic at this point, but there you go."

"Still, I'm proud of you for showing up. I was half-expecting you to put up a fuss."

“I’m not a toddler, Alana.”

“No, but sometimes you act like it,” Alana smirked at him. “You’re the one who said you weren’t comfortable with this.”

“And I meant it.” Will raised an eyebrow. “Still, what other option do I have?”

“Well, there’s doctor Lecter,” Alana said bluntly, cocking her head to the side. “To be honest, I never understood why you wanted to end your therapy with him. At first, I thought you just didn’t like him – because you can be very particular about people. Imagine my surprise when I went to his office to pick up his notes, and you were there. ‘To be polite’, I believe you said.” Alana gave an incredulous smile. “I’m just trying to wrap my head around this.”

Putting aside the fact that he’d been unprepared for Hannibal to be casually mentioned by his new therapist so soon – which had caused a sensation akin to being stabbed in his gut – Will found himself at a loss for words. He hadn’t expected her to ask about that. Like a moron, he hadn’t even realized how curious it must have seemed to her, finding him in Hannibal’s office that day. Now that she pointed it out, it seemed like a pretty fair question. What the hell had he been doing there? Telling her the truth was entirely out of the question. So he was left staring dumbly at her for a few seconds, frantically trying to come up with a plausible explanation.

“I know he went with you to the first murder scene,” Alana said, voice softening. “I thought it was a bit unorthodox when I heard that he’d offered to assist you on site… Did something happen?”

Will released a slow breath. She’d just handed him an answer on a silver platter. He collected himself for a moment, taking his time to find the words.

“He was with me, yes.” He rolled his shoulders back and cleared his throat. “The first scene was the only one Jack ever let me near. Everything went to hell after that.”

Alana nodded slowly.

“That’s when Jack ordered a sick leave, right?”

“Yes. I came to certain conclusions that he disagreed with. Words were exchanged.” He gave Alana a dry smile. “He got mad.”

“Sounds like Jack,” she mirrored his smile. They shared a look of solidarity and Will relaxed a fraction.

“Doctor Lecter was there to support me, because I’d been finding it increasingly difficult to separate myself from the personas I enter for my analysis. I asked him to piece me back together afterwards. And he tried,” Will sighed, lowering his gaze, thoughts racing through his head. “But it backfired. I ended up associating him with the scene, he became something like a trigger for me.”

“So having him as your therapist got uncomfortable?”

“Having him for a therapist got *impossible*,” Will said, looking back up at her, eyes as frank as he could muster. “Every time I saw him, I was reminded of the scene, and then I found out that Jack had employed him as my replacement. I was frustrated. Angry. I couldn’t stand it.”

“I see.”

“But the thing is, I was never angry at *him*,” Will said, keeping his voice steady despite the ache in his throat. “None of it was his fault. He was trying to help, and I wasn’t going to hold that against him. I wanted to tell him that. That’s why I went there.”

Will gritted his teeth against the onslaught of emotions his own lies brought about. Flashes of pain came and went. Alana gave him a scrutinizing look and leaned back in her chair.

“I suppose that makes sense,” she said, tone sympathetic. “This whole situation seems to have taken quite a toll on you.”

Will simply nodded, relieved she seemed to have accepted his story.

“If it had been up to me,” she continued, “you wouldn’t have had to visit that scene in the first place. I didn’t think you were ready, but Jack insisted.” She shook her head with an irritated frown. “He put doctor Lecter in an impossible situation, and I’ll be sure to let his superiors know that.”

She looked down to the notepad she had in her lap, wrote things down, and Will stared vehemently at her.

“I know you think that,” he bit out. “But you’re wrong. I was ready. *Am* ready.”

She shook her head again, making the dark curtains of her hair sway as she continued writing.

“Will, you just admitted to me that you’d been having troubles distancing yourself from what you do – the headspaces you go into. After what happened with Hobbs, you came apart.” She finally looked up at him, expression firm. “I saw it coming. And doctor Lecter has informed me that you’d barely started to process the trauma of that evening. That you can’t sleep. That makes you a liability, Will.”

“That’s not what’s happening to me!” Will’s voice burst out of him much louder than he’d meant, emotions running high. His skull throbbed as he glared at her, irritated that his patience had already ran out. She met his gaze calmly, leaning forward once more.

“Alright. Why don’t you tell me what you think is happening to you.”

A few tense seconds went by, with the two of them never breaking eye contact. Will wished he’d thought this through more carefully. Wished he’d spent some time preparing for her questions, but there hadn’t been any time. He’d only just gotten back two days ago, and when

the dogs didn't need his attention, the preheat made it so he couldn't focus on anything but the incessant *longing*, crawling up and down his spine. If he had to be painfully honest with himself, he'd underestimated her. Alana was a beta and he'd never perceived her as any kind of threat. But the way she looked at him now, eyes intense and analytical, he realized she was actually good at her job.

It dawned on him then.

"This isn't about me being unstable, Alana," he said, no longer trying to hide his irritation. "Jack made me take a sick leave because he didn't have grounds to suspend me. All I did was come up with a theory that didn't match his. He didn't want to lose face." He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. "Because he's an alpha, and I'm a beta."

The therapist looked taken aback for a moment.

"Are you suggesting-"

"I'm saying sexism exists even within the FBI. You've seen it. You've experienced it." Will raised an eyebrow at her. "He dismissed your opinions regarding my mental state and went straight to doctor Lecter instead. That's not a coincidence. Nor is the fact that he wanted Lecter to replace me after I was suspended, instead of you."

Alana's eyes narrowed as she digested what Will had just put forth.

"You're saying Jack is purposely keeping you from the investigation because he doesn't want to be proven wrong by a beta?"

"Would that be the craziest thing you've ever heard?" Will leaned back once more, turning his face towards the windows. "I'm an expert analysist, and still he dismisses my findings as the result of my 'unraveling mind'." Will scoffed. "I'm not unraveling. I was shaken up after Hobbs, I'll admit that. But I haven't had any hallucinations in months. The reason I can't sleep," he paused for effect and turned back to look at her, pleased to see her expression had shifted into a mildly troubled one, "is because Jack is keeping me away from where I'm most needed, and it's driving me insane."

"They arrested the killer the other day. The man gave himself up. The case is closed."

"He's not convicted yet. Besides, there'll be other cases. Other times when Jack's ego gets in the way and innocent people get killed. I'm not the liability here. He is."

"That is an immense accusation." Alana swallowed. She looked rattled.

"Well. It's an immense situation."

Another minute went by without either one of them breaking the silence. Will had regained much of his previous calm, and ignoring the painful throb at the base of his skull came easier when he realized Alana was caught. He had her.

“I’m not looking to go out in the field right away,” he said, voice subdued. “All I want is a chance to contribute. I’m an expert in my field, Alana. Not some fragile porcelain teacup. If you honestly think that keeping me away from what matters most to me is somehow going to help me, that it’s going to make me *sleep* better at night, fine. I can’t force your hand. But I’m telling you, not being allowed to work just because Jack’s too proud to admit when he’s wrong… that’s what’s going to make me lose my mind.”

Alana’s hand came up to stroke softly across her mouth and she turned away from him with a thoughtful scowl. Her eyes darted back to him before she took her hand down.

“I still think you need therapy. That’s not going to change just because you have a way with words.”

“Come on, Alana,” Will sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. “We used to be friends. You know me. I’m a Wolf Trap recluse who owns seven dogs. I’ll *always* need therapy.”

She stared blankly at him for a second before bursting out in laughter. Will smiled at her, pleased that his self-deprecating humor had had the desired effect. She loosened up.

“That’s true,” she chuckled, before sobering a little. “You didn’t tell doctor Lecter any of this?”

“Like I said, he’s an alpha. As much as I consider him a friend, I wasn’t sure he’d understand this.”

She put her notepad away with a sigh and seemed to weigh options in her head while Will waited, trying his best to hide how tense he felt. He was so close now. A sudden, particularly intense throb pierced through his skull and Will couldn’t help the wince of pain that escaped him, prompting her to look at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just a headache,” Will explained, waving his hand. “As we’ve established, sleep is an issue for me these days.”

Her eyebrows knitted together in a concerned frown, before her expression smoothed out into something that resembled resolution.

“I’ll talk to Jack. Let him know you’re ready to go back.”

Will gave a relieved sigh and was just about to tell her how grateful he was, when she held up her hand, letting him know she wasn’t done.

“But as we’ve also established, you do need therapy, Will. You need someone to talk to. I can see it. And we did use to be friends.” She gave him a sympathetic smile. “I know talking about your feelings isn’t exactly your favorite pastime activity, but I think it’d do you good. So here’s what I’m proposing – I’ll clear you, on the condition that you’ll continue your weekly therapy with me until I estimate that you’re stable enough to soldier on by yourself.”

Will's shoulders sagged a little, unable to keep the reluctance hidden. Alana noticed.

"Look, we don't even have to call it therapy. We can just… chat. As friends." She cocked her head to the side with a soft expression. "It'll let *me* sleep better at night."

Will regarded her tiredly for a moment.

"Sure you're not just looking for an excuse to pick my genius brain?"

She gave a smirk at that, which Will managed to return.

"Your genius brain needs an outlet, too, you know."

"Fine. I accept your terms."

Will wasn't exactly thrilled with the development, but still pleased that he'd be allowed to go back. Talk to the perp. He needed to see the man for himself. Alana seemed pleased, too. She scribbled something down in her notes and smiled at him, leaning back in her chair with a slightly more relaxed posture.

"We still have half an hour, so let's give the friendly chat a go," she suggested. "How's life, Will?"

"Really?" He gave her an unimpressed scowl. She grinned.

"You just said you accepted my terms. Give me *something* to work with."

"Life's good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What'd you do last weekend?"

Will's voice seemed to get caught in his throat at the question and he could only pray that she didn't notice the way he had to struggle to keep his composure.

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"I watched TV and went for a walk with the pack. That's about it."

"What about friends?"

"I don't like that show."

“Funny,” Alana gave him a pointed look. “Is that your way of trying to avoid the subject?”

“Again, I’m a Wolf Trap recluse with seven dogs,” Will repeated with a dry smile. “Friends haven’t exactly been a priority for me.”

“What about doctor Lecter?” She leaned closer, curiosity alight in her eyes. “You said you consider him a friend. Is that true?”

Will swallowed against the growing discomfort and managed a shrug.

“Sure.”

“After you terminated your therapy with him, did you spend time together? Other than the time I met you in his office?”

The discomfort took over and Will was forced to shift in his seated position, clearing his throat in the process. The question seemed almost interrogational – like she suspected something – and it made him nervous.

“Once or twice, for coffee. Why?”

The beta seemed to hesitate for a moment, smile faltering into something less playful.

“I’m curious about him,” she finally admitted. “I shouldn’t be talking about this with you, but seeing as we’re just having a friendly chat and I’d like to get you to open up, I’ll open up, too. I’m interested in Hannibal.”

She said his name. Will stared at her, feeling something dark and raw and furious open up inside of him, like a wound, like a black hole sucking the very life out of him from within, because she said his name. She was interested in him. Interested in Hannibal. She wanted him. He remembered the way she’d looked at Hannibal that day, when they met in his office, the way she’d gotten too close, taken liberties, and the way Hannibal had looked over at him, at Will, the way he’d smirked and moved away from her, because they both knew that he didn’t belong to Alana, he belonged to-

“He’s being courted.” The words were out of him before he knew what had happened. Alana blinked at him. Will’s voice was just as calm as it had been before, which surprised him, considering his overwhelming urge to reach out, wrap his hands around her throat, and squeeze.

“He is?” Alana looked mildly disappointed. “By whom?”

“Some omega,” Will said, keeping his tone light. “They went to Chicago together recently. He told me about it when I went to see him last week.”

“Oh.” She seemed to consider the situation for a moment. “But they’re not bonded?”

He frowned confusedly at her, apprehension smarting in his chest.

“No…”

“Right. So there’s still a chance then,” she said, smiling. Will forced himself to return the smile, though he suspected it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“A chance?”

“Yeah, for me to get closer to him.” Alana tucked her hair behind her ear and grinned mischievously at Will, as though they were two teenagers exchanging secrets. “So long as he isn’t bonded, you know… All’s fair. What about you? Got anyone special in your life?”

Will remained dumbstruck and silent for a moment or two, as the reality of the situation sank in. Hannibal was not his mate. They had not bonded. And Will had effectively ended their relationship two days earlier. That was entirely on him. He had no right to feel the way he felt. No right to be angry with Alana. And still.

“I have to say, I’m impressed.” Will broke the silence, ignoring Alana’s latest questions, and gave her a look he hoped was friendly. Alana gave him a surprised smile.

“Why’s that?”

“I mean, you’re so confident,” he said, keeping his friendly mask on, feeling it crack at the edges as his words crossed over into pure cruelty, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. “To think you stand a chance against an omega.”

For a small eternity, the only thing that broke the silence was the ticking from the clock on the wall above Will’s head. Alana’s smile faltered as something deeply wounded settled in her eyes and she turned away from him with an unsteady chuckle, and something inside Will ached as he watched her making an admirable effort to pretend that what he’d just said didn’t bother her.

“Crazier things have happened, right?”

“I guess,” Will conceded, subdued and ashamed of himself. With the atmosphere effectively ruined, Will got up from the couch and gave her a softer look. “Headache’s getting worse. I’m going home to rest up a bit. See you next week?”

She mustered up a smile that almost looked genuine and Will hated himself for putting that strain on her. While the mere thought of her getting close to Hannibal still made him want to smash her head through a window, he was painfully aware that he didn’t really have the right to feel that way. And Alana had no way of knowing what Will’s history with Hannibal was. It’d remain a secret, always.

“See you next week, Will.”

Will gritted his teeth as he walked out of her office, out of the building, and made it all the

way into his car before he buried his face into his hands, eyes stinging, head throbbing. He sat there for what felt like an hour, wallowing in his self-loathing, allowing himself for just a few moments to succumb to the longing. The missing. The grief. He hadn't expected himself to miss Hannibal this much. Which, in retrospect, seemed naïve. But he wasn't about to change his mind about this. He just needed to wait for Hannibal to get out of his system. He was just going through a detox. Once the worst of it was over, the rest would be easy.

And then he'd be able to carry on like he always had. And Hannibal would mate and bond with someone else. Maybe even Alana. And Will would move on. And Hannibal would forget about him. And they'd never…

Will concentrated on driving, ignoring the way his knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel.

Hannibal looked out over the foggy pier, expression neutral. Not at all matching the way his pulse ticked in his throat, the overwhelming satisfaction that simmered in his veins; this was an odd kind of afterglow he'd missed. It was only four in the morning, but the crowd that normally occupied this space would soon be arriving, blissfully unaware of what had taken place there a mere couple of hours earlier. Hannibal rarely crossed paths with fishermen. They never entered into Hannibal's hunting grounds, and although many of them lacked the graceful elegance that Hannibal so highly valued, there was a terse and unapologetic atmosphere to them that he actually respected. No ingratiating smiles, no phony attempts to impress him. Just gritty reality. They killed for a living. This was their territory, and Hannibal was trespassing.

Alas, this was the perfect location, in many ways. Befitting the target for the evening, with his unappealing folds of skin, protruding eyes and large lips – he much reminded Hannibal of a fish. Possibly cod. He'd been loud and drunk at the lounge party Hannibal had just attended; an event Hannibal had hoped to spend conversing with those worthy of his attention – and this ugly beast had completely ruined his discussion with Amelia Davidson; a young but promising opera singer whose musical talents Hannibal appreciated. For a few seconds, Hannibal had actually been in a relatively good mood, and the pleasant conversation had taken his mind off certain things, until this one showed up, spilled wine on her blouse and had the nerve to pretend he'd done so by accident, while leering at her soaked chest like some savage.

And Amelia had smiled at the man. She'd looked at him with obvious apprehension, embarrassment evident in every inch of her body language, and still somehow forced herself to give the man a smile and tell him that it was quite alright. Accidents happen, she'd said softly, in her fearful effort not to aggravate the drunk alpha, before excusing herself.

As if Hannibal hadn't had enough of this already. As if he hadn't seen enough omegas get harassed and humiliated by alphas who couldn't control themselves, like spoiled children, like cavemen, and Hannibal was ashamed by association. For all his efforts trying to

convince Will alphas weren't the monsters he thought they were, there would always be those who contradicted him. There would always be alphas who kept the stereotype going; those who would make omegas believe it was better - safer - to stay away and hide.

And tonight he'd snapped. Again. The control he'd always held onto so effortlessly was slipping away from him and the fact that he *had* to struggle to contain himself made him all the more frustrated. How was he any better than them?

It's been a week. He's not changing his mind.

He gritted his teeth where he stood, eyebrows knitting together slightly as he looked down. They'd find him here, tied up in their nets and with fishing hooks holding his cut-up skin in place. Guts were spilling out of him like grape vines – except, of course, for the ones Hannibal had kept for himself. Not the liver, obviously. Hannibal could only assume its condition left much to be desired, considering the man's intoxicated state earlier. But the lungs, he figured, would make for a lovely mash.

And for the moment, he felt satiated.

He allowed himself another minute of silent gazing. The fog made it so he couldn't see how far the water of Chesapeake Bay stretched out in front of him, but he didn't mind. Hannibal liked the fog. It hid him well. Like a blanket, it encased him and made it easier to pretend that the world was just this. White, steamy stillness. Clean and cold and quiet.

An uncomfortable shiver ran up his back. Hannibal had come to loathe those shivers. They were his body's natural reminders, like a built-in alarm clock aggressively shouting at him that he hadn't mingled his scent with his partner's in some time and that it needed to be done. In the short amount of time he'd spent with Will, he'd grown attached enough to the younger man for his body to respond like this to said man's sudden absence. Shivers. Headaches. Tension. Little physical reminders of his failure.

No matter. They would cease eventually. Like everything else.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed, even though things are a little bleak.

Mistakes

Chapter Notes

:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The week that followed Will's first therapy session with Alana was hellish. Hellish in a way that Will had never experienced before. Hellish in a way that had him waking up several times each night with the unrelenting urge to crawl out of his own skin and weep over his sorry existence.

Will had been so certain that the choices that had led him here were steps in the right direction, as though he was actually growing – he was now starting to realize, to his immense despair and horror, that he'd made a severe miscalculation.

He wasn't growing. If anything, he felt like he was shrinking – thinning out, drying out, like some wilting plant that desperately needed to be watered. He didn't want to think about just what kind of water he needed, even though he knew. Oh, he knew.

This morning was no different. Will awoke, feeling entirely unrested and crusty, to the collective dog breath of his pack, protectively gathered around his bed – a habit they had taken up not long after Will returned from Chicago. They knew something was up – if the smell of him didn't give it away, his mood certainly did. Cursing silently under his breath, ignoring the throb in his head, the stinging in his eyes, Will managed to get out of bed and haphazardly give the dog closest to him a pat on the head before he made his way downstairs and into the kitchen.

He prepared coffee for himself on autopilot, staring silently into space as he stirred milk into the beverage with a teaspoon. Shortly after his return, a mere few days after the last time he saw Hannibal, things had turned grey. Literally grey. Although his eyes were still perfectly capable of registering the blue of his coffee cup and the faded beige of his morning robe, his brain couldn't comprehend what colours were or how they made him feel.

Waves of intense sadness washed over him and Will felt how he'd started swaying on his feet, as though he was in fact standing in water. He grabbed onto the kitchen counter and forced himself to take a sip of the coffee. It did very little to help.

Guilt. He'd come to realize that that's what it was.

The harsh way he'd spoken to Alana last time he saw her certainly contributed to that, but more than anything, he thought of Hannibal. The seconds after he'd declared he no longer needed the alpha – the moment just before he'd turned away and walked out. Those seconds played on repeat in his head, made him absolutely despise himself. The shift in Hannibal's scent. The hardening edges in his face; transforming the older man into someone Will didn't recognize before his very eyes. Will had done that. And then he'd walked away.

He'd ruined everything.

And his heat was closing in. Rapidly.

Will took a few more sips of his coffee, waiting for the caffeine to kick in, and made a mental note to call the hospital. He'd need medical assistance for this, there was no way around it. Still, he'd hoped to have just a bit more time – just long enough to see the man who claimed to have killed all those omegas, so that he could perform a new analysis, make sense of it all. He still didn't believe his initial theory was wrong, but he was curious about the so-called perpetrator. About his motives. Why Dr Chilton seemed so convinced. Will wanted, so desperately, to solve the case. He needed more time.

A medically induced coma was certainly effective in terms of avoiding having to live through his first heat in many years all on his own – an ordeal that could, potentially, cause him real harm – but the downside was that the heat lasted longer that way. He'd have to be put down for weeks. And the post-coma recovery was no laughing matter.

A dark, selfish part of Will sneered at him from somewhere deep inside his mind; he could've at least waited until *after* his heat before stupidly deciding to end things with Hannibal. Would've likely saved him some time, even if it meant crossing lines that Will had never crossed before.

Just look at this mess. This is all on you, Graham.

Guilt stabbed at him once more.

What the hell have I become?

Will sank into one of the chairs next to his kitchen table and pulled his tablet towards him, turning it on. More news about the omega murders, and the man charged with them. Will frowned contemplatively as he read the articles.

Apparently, throughout questioning, the man had been able to provide detailed information about the acts – information that only the killer would reasonably be aware of. None of these details were disclosed in the articles, of course, but the fact that he knew things were obviously pointing in the direction of him being guilty.

How the hell was that possible? Will was not wrong. He knew he wasn't. Had his head been hurting less, he might have been able to connect the dots – alas, despite the coffee's best efforts, Will's head remained foggy.

Will suddenly sat upright with a gasp and shut his eyes tightly. He shakily put the cup down on the table and carefully pushed his chair back, before slipping down from the seat to lie down on the floor, all the while keeping his eyes closed. He just needed to wait. Just a few minutes, and it'd be over.

Trembling, he curled into a foetal position, and waited. Cramps and mild spasms went through him as a dreadful, intense longing and sense of loss settled in the centre of his chest and made it impossible to breathe; the air completely locked in his throat. The first time this happened, Will had panicked and it had lasted much longer because of that. Now, he knew what it was. He knew it'd pass. He just needed to stay calm and wait.

He'd gone far enough with Hannibal for his body to react this way to the alpha's prolonged absence. This close to his heat, Will's omega instincts were going on a rampage, and lashed out. As a result, Will would occasionally have these little episodes where it felt like he was going to die. No big deal.

A whimper escaped him, and he registered the worried whines of his dogs somewhere in the background as his eyes welled up with tears. What a sorry sight. He pressed his lips tightly closed. Wait. Stay calm.

Man, it was getting harder. He didn't have much time.

Once the worst of it had passed, and the cramps in his muscles finally loosened their grip, Will rolled over to his back and breathed for a minute or two. Soon, he was strong enough to get back up in the chair, though his fingers still shook. He sent his dogs a comforting smile.

"Don't worry, guys. I'm okay."

Will couldn't tell if they believed him. They continued watching him, protectively, from the other side of the room. Will made a show of stretching his arms out and yawning, wanting them to see just how perfectly 'well' he was feeling, before reaching for his coffee once more, and turning to his pad. He perked up for real when he discovered that he'd received an email from Jack. His pulse picked up speed as he read.

Hi Will,
Alana green-lit your return. I personally think it's a bit too soon, but there you go. Can't argue with the professionals. You're officially cleared, I've already put in the paperwork. I assume you'll be wanting to see the perp, as we discussed over the phone last time, but I'm telling you – we're pretty confident he's our guy. Come see me in my office, and I'll fill you in. Welcome back.

Will heaved a shivering sigh of relief. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, a spark of joy lit up in him, and it was invigorating. Finally, something was going right. After the cruel things Will had said to Alana, he'd started to worry that she'd go back on her word and refuse to clear him, or worse – that she'd tell Jack about Will's accusations. Evidently, she was a much better person than Will gave her credit for.

He stood up, suddenly filled to the brim with energy and a sense of purpose, and he made his

way to the bathroom for a quick shower. He even put in the extra effort of combing his hair into something that at least resembled what Hannibal had done with his hair the night of the vernissage. A rueful feeling filled him as he looked at himself in the mirror. He was pale from sleep deprivation. He missed Hannibal. Desperately. Couldn't deny that. But now was not the time to wallow in regret – he was finally reinstated, and he wanted to look decently put-together upon his return. Didn't want to give anyone reason to suspect he wasn't well enough to do his job.

Will hesitated for a few seconds, before resolutely stalking over to his closet, opening it and letting his gaze travel over its scarce contents before landing on the item he'd been looking for.

Biting his bottom lip nervously, he dragged his hand across the knitted sweater. Hannibal had bought it for him just before they left Chicago. They'd still been good then. Will vaguely remembered how he'd felt that morning. The Star Bucks incident. How they'd bantered amongst themselves. Hannibal's warm smile as Will finally relented and allowed the alpha to pay for the items, simply because the man wanted to. Will had never been spoiled growing up. Didn't know how to react to being so… taken care of. *Cherished* . But he knew, deep down, that he'd enjoyed it.

A painful ache settled in the back of Will's throat and he needed to swallow several times to regain his focus and composure.

He took the sweater out. It was exquisite, business-casual and absolutely appropriate – more so than the clothes he'd worn to work before. Before he could stop himself, he'd brought the shirt to his nose and inhaled.

Ah. There it was. *Fuck* .

Will's head started swimming. He hadn't worn the shirt since the day he'd left Hannibal on the airport, but during the hours he'd worn it, they'd been close enough for some of Hannibal's scent to land on the fabric and it remained. Just a hint, an inkling, but it was *there* , and it was enough.

Bergamot. Steel.

He sank down into a crouched position, with his face buried in the shirt, and just breathed for a minute. Felt himself come together, piece by piece. Allowed for the scent of Hannibal to steady him. He registered a simmering glow of arousal in the pit of his stomach, but it didn't take over. What mattered now was really just how focused it made him feel – although the longing intensified. He'd have to deal with the backlash later. He was running out of time.

Will pulled the shirt on, matched it with a decent-looking pair of slacks and, since he was already wearing the shirt, opted for the coat Hannibal had also purchased for him – it, too, carried the scent that made Will suddenly feel like anything was possible and colours had meaning. It was with a sense of genuine sorrow Will doused himself in the pine-scented beta perfume once he was dressed, but his new-found energy stayed intact.

Feeling more refreshed than he had in several days, Will packed his tablet into his bag, along with a few other items, and left.

Hannibal gazed contemplatively at the BSU headquarters, before taking a resolute step forward. Truthfully, he saw no purpose in being there, seeing as Jack had already made his mind up regarding the omega murders case and had already received "input" by Dr Chilton – incompetent as he was. Hannibal wasn't as personally invested in the case as a certain profiler he knew, and didn't see any point in continuing to assist. He'd rather move on, direct his focus elsewhere. But when Jack called him up and asked him to come in, since Hannibal had technically been the primary advisor on the case – and because he was more familiar with the case than Chilton – Hannibal's pride compelled him to agree to the meeting. Chilton was famously egocentric and frequently came to hasty conclusions in his eager to prove himself – whereas Hannibal famously enjoyed proving him wrong.

Still, while Hannibal wasn't personally invested in the case itself, he was certainly personally invested in those who were. He'd hoped to distance himself from all of this – really, it would have been the wiser move to turn Jack down. Everything about this situation reminded Hannibal of the one person Hannibal did not want to be reminded of.

Hannibal was a hunter in every sense of the word, but when it came to respecting the wishes of omegas – and especially those he deemed potential partners – he was a man of principle. He was a hunter; not a stalker. Will had made it abundantly clear that their courtship had come to an end, and Hannibal would oblige. No matter how much suffering it caused him. And it caused him a great deal of that.

Sleepless nights. Frustration building up; constantly worrying, constantly wondering. Where was he? What was he doing? *How* was he doing? Tension in his muscles, ache in his chest. Longing. Loss.

Hannibal's jaw ticked as he approached the building, reminding himself that Will would not be there, and that he just needed to get through a brief meeting with Jack before he could return to his office and continue with his work; continue to move on.

Just as he was about to enter the main entrance, a petite form exited through the doors and bumped into him – he quickly recognized the form as Alana Bloom. She looked up at him, cheeks reddening a bit, and took a step back to give him room.

"Dr Lecter! I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking," she said, smiling apologetically. He smiled back at her, effortlessly slipping the mask on.

"Dr Bloom," he greeted her. "Did Jack summon you as well? I'm beginning to wonder if he intends to ask every therapist in the city for help."

“No,” Alana laughed, “I’m here on other business. I wasn’t aware Jack had called you. Is this about the omega murders?” She sobered a bit and gave him a curious scowl. “I thought Chilton-“

“Chilton was only called in because I was out of town when the man turned himself in. I’m more familiar with the case overall, so Jack wants me to perform an additional evaluation.”

“Hm,” Alana’s eyebrows bobbed up once and she gave him a pointed look. “Sounds to me like he doesn’t trust Chilton as much as he wants everyone to believe he does. But what do I know?”

Quite a lot, I’m sure.

Hannibal smiled, but didn’t comment on her musings, even though he certainly agreed with her.

“Heading back to work then?”

“Yeah,” she sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s been a busy day. I’m booked full lately-”

“How’s Will coming along?”

He hadn’t meant to ask, but before he knew it, the question was already out of him. He had to struggle – really struggle – to keep the tone of his voice light and casual, as though saying the omega’s name out loud didn’t make Hannibal’s heart tighten painfully in his chest. Alana was Will’s therapist now. She must have had at least one session with him by now, which meant she’d seen him more recently than Hannibal had, which meant she was likely to know more about his general state than he did, and he couldn’t stand it. Couldn’t stand not knowing.

His smile stiffened as he fought to keep it up. He could only pray Alana wouldn’t notice. She gave him an apprehensive look, but still somehow kept her expression soft.

“You know I can’t discuss that with you, Dr Lecter,” she said, eyebrows coming together in a concerned scowl. “Although I certainly empathize the wish to know how your former patient is doing, I can’t go into detail-“

“No, of course not,” Hannibal said and put a hand up to stop her. “I didn’t mean to overstep any boundaries; I was merely curious about his general state. I haven’t seen him in some time, you see.”

“Ah, well,” Alana shrugged, a small wrinkle appearing between her brows. Hannibal found it difficult to discern what it meant. Had something happened? His mouth went dry at the notion. Will had been in pre-heat the last time he saw him; if the younger man had gone into heat on his own, he would likely be suffering tremendously; worst case scenario, he might have ended up at the hospital-

“I cleared him.”

Hannibal stared silently at her for a second, before registering what she had actually said.

“You cleared him?”

“Yeah, for work,” she clarified. “I figured I might as well tell you that much, considering you’ll probably see him soon enough, if you’re going to work on the case again.” She gave a strained smile. “He agreed to continue with therapy for a while longer, though. I convinced him that he needs it. But that’s all I can really tell you about his progress.”

“Is he here?” Hannibal found that his own voice sounded far away, as shock settled into his system. It tugged on his instincts; he caught himself inhaling deeply through his nose, searching for Will’s scent. Alana didn’t appear to notice, though, because she merely shook his head.

“No, I just handed in my evaluation to Jack. I’m not sure when he’s going to turn up. I’m hoping it’s not until later this week, I’d prefer it if he eased back into it, but you know as well as I do how badly he’s been wanting to come back.”

Hannibal nodded, arranged his expression into one of troubled ponder.

“I do indeed,” he said and sent her a warmer look. “I’m sure you needn’t worry, though. If you deemed him stable enough to come back, I’m certain he is. I’ve never had reason to doubt your abilities, Dr Bloom.”

She let out a short laugh and gave him a playfully reprimanding look.

“Really now? I specifically recall you doubting me when Jack desperately wanted him to return, early on. Don’t you remember? We were in your office.”

“I do remember,” Hannibal said, “and I apologize. It wasn’t that I doubted you – the situation was… precarious. Truth to be told, I wanted to get Jack off my back, so I opted for diplomacy. But I kept what you told me in mind when I made the decision to allow his early return. It backfired, though,” he admitted and gave her a friendly look. “You were right. He needed more time to heal.”

She shrugged, though the way her cheeks glowed up with joy made it clear she was happy with his praise.

“You were right, too – he’s stronger than I gave him credit for. Which is why I’ve cleared him,” she laughed, shaking her head softly. “Although Jack didn’t seem too pleased. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is,” Hannibal agreed, producing an amused smile. “Well, I should head inside. Jack’s waiting for me.”

“Sure, I’ll get out of your way,” Alana smiled and stepped to the side to give him more room, keeping her gaze downcast as he stepped past her. “Good luck in there.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, uh,” her voiced trailed off from behind him and Hannibal turned to give her a politely curious look. She cleared her throat and very obviously made an effort to appear relaxed, though Hannibal could smell the stress on her. “I hear congrats are in order?”

His eyebrows inched closer together in genuine confusion.

“What for?”

An embarrassed huff of laughter escaped the beta.

“You’re being courted, aren’t you? That’s great, Hannibal.”

Hannibal paused for a moment. The beta hugged her laptop bag closer to her body. When it dawned on him that he was making her nervous, he quickly relaxed into a more casual stance and softened his expression.

“Did Jack tell you?”

It was her turn to look confused.

“No, Will did.”

The two therapists merely stared at one another for a few moments. She seemed to catch herself.

“We were just having a friendly conversation, it wasn’t part of his therapy, so I’m not breaking any rules here,” she said, adding a defensive smile.

Hannibal barely registered any of the words that followed the omega’s name. It was challenging to pinpoint the emotions that welled up in him at this piece of information. Anger? Frustration? Hurt? Hope? He couldn’t make it out, couldn’t make sense of it, and that was frustrating in and of itself.

Rather than confirming or denying anything, Hannibal merely smiled at her, though he feared the smile didn’t reach his eyes this time, because the beta’s expression shifted into one of mild alarm, as though she realized she’d hit a nerve.

“Jack’s waiting for me,” he stated, turned away from her, and walked into the building without saying anything else.

Will entered the BSU building and was immensely pleased when his ID card granted him entrance to the floor he was heading for. Their holding cells were down below, in what Will sometimes referred to as “the dungeon”. The perpetrator was likely still being held there, if they were in the process of questioning him. If he was indeed convicted, he’d be sent elsewhere, but Will doubted they’d gotten that far. This was, after all, one of the biggest cases in Baltimore’s recent history and he didn’t think Jack was about to ship the man off to another department, unless he really needed to. The alpha would want to bask in this glory a little while longer. And that was precisely why Will had no intention of visiting Jack in his office until *after* he’d gotten the chance to see the man.

Will walked up to the gates leading to the holding cell area, corrected the collar of his coat and gave the guard a stern look as he held up his ID card. The man gave a curt nod and stepped aside, letting Will inside. Tentatively, Will took a few steps into the large hallway, glancing at the locked doors he passed. Most of the cells were empty – most perpetrators only stayed for a limited time. But further into the room, he found the holding cell he was looking for.

A thick, impenetrable glass wall separated Will from the man huddled inside. Small circles were cut out, to allow for air circulation, but other than that Will was completely and utterly shielded from the man – and he from Will.

Will placed himself at a certain distance from the glass wall and took in the man’s appearance without saying anything.

The alpha hadn’t seemed to notice him. He was sitting on the floor, with his back against the bed, and his head resting in his hands. He appeared to be whispering something to himself. Will took note of how the man’s hair was drenched in sweat, and how the heel of his left food was bobbing up and down. Clearly, the man was under stress, but that wasn’t surprising – most people reacted this way to being locked up, charged with murder.

Will stepped closer to the glass wall, purposely placing himself in proximity of one of the holes where air flowed out, and he easily picked up on the man’s fragrance. It stung in his nose. Alpha, definitely. But not ‘his’ alpha. Not the scent he was longing for.

Will’s body underwent a series of confusing reactions; the arousal that swirled around in the pit of his stomach couldn’t be helped – Will was in preheat, and the man was an alpha. But laced in the man’s scent was also a fair amount of distress, sour sweat and something that Will could only label ‘sickness’, though it was hard to pinpoint exactly what that sickness was. It was repulsive enough to make the arousal die down as soon as it had arrived, and he steadied himself before opening his mouth.

“Hello.”

The man flinched at the sound of his voice and immediately looked up at him, eyes wide and unfocused. His face was in need of a scrub and a shave, Will noted. The eyes were a rich brown, made all the brighter by how red the whites of his eyes were. Around his neck was a cold chain with a small cross. A tattoo of a rose decorated the man’s right forearm, and there was a faded scar across his jaw. In many ways, the man certainly lived up to the stereotype of

what criminal men looked like. But the fearful way he looked at Will made for a rather bizarre impression.

“My name is Will. What’s yours?”

The man clumsily got to his feet, all the while keeping his eyes on Will. He was tall, even for an alpha.

“Aaron.” His voice was deep and hoarse, as though he hadn’t used it in a while. They regarded each other apprehensively from their respective sides of the glass wall for a minute.

“Why are you here, Aaron?” Will asked, trying to get a better sense of the man in front of him. The alpha grimaced – sorrow and despair swept across his face.

“Because I need to be. Ain’t safe for me to be out there. Ain’t safe for anyone if I’m out there.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I hurt people.”

“You hurt omegas?”

Aaron scrunched his eyes shut and brought a hand up to tug at his sweaty hair. He then pressed the palm of his hand against his forehead and struck himself twice.

“I’m full of sin. Such filth. Such filth. Look at this filth.” Aaron turned his back to Will. “Ain’t safe for you to be here, omega.”

Will gritted his teeth and grasped onto his resolve, despite the fear that washed over him at the mention of his gender. How Aaron was able to tell, he had no idea. The guard outside certainly hadn’t noticed.

“Did you kill them?” He pressed, tone slightly more agitated now. Aaron sank back down to the floor and curled in on himself with a sob. Will’s eyebrows drew close together in bewilderment as he regarded the man.

“He said I was filth. He said so. Ain’t safe.”

“Who said?”

Aaron rolled over to his back and clutched his necklace with one hand.

“Father. Forgive me, for I have sinned. Forgive me. Forgive me…” Aaron continued this mantra and Will realized that he was unlikely to get anything more out of him. At least not anything that made sense. It was clear to him that the man was mentally ill. Desperately so. The fear that had latched onto him just a couple of moments ago was steadily turning into pure pity.

He turned away from the cell and started making his way back, steps purposeful and shoulders straightened with confidence.

He knew with absolute certainty now.

No way in hell this is our guy.

"I wanted to give you a call first thing, of course," Jack said and leaned back in his chair behind the desk, fingers lacing together. "But it was practically the middle of night, things got chaotic really quickly and the press found out… We needed to get someone to take a look at him as soon as possible, and Dr Chilton practically volunteered."

Hannibal raised one eyebrow and turned his gaze back to the documents in his hands once more.

"I'm sure he did."

The air reeked of stale coffee and stress in the building and Hannibal was still struggling with the idea of Will making an appearance at any moment, knowing now that the omega had been allowed back at the BSU. He wanted to get this over and done with as soon as possible, so that he could return to the calm of his own home and digest what Alana had divulged.

As a therapist, it should have been relatively easy for him to take a step away from the situation, analyse it objectively and reach any number of theories as to why on earth Will would tell Alana that he was being courted. As it stood, however, Hannibal couldn't distance himself far enough to come to a plausible conclusion. Thoughts were getting jumbled up in his head, and the difficult emotions tearing through him were of no help at all.

He sighed deeply as he caught himself re-reading the same series of words for the fourth time without taking any of it in, and looked up at Jack.

"Dr Chilton may have been hasty," he said, feeling rather confident in this statement despite only having read bits and pieces of the other therapist's written evaluation. "That's not to say he's entirely wrong," he added, noticing how Jack immediately tensed up, "or that you have made a mistake. But I'll need to see the man, talk to him, before I can perform an evaluation of my own."

"Of course," Jack nodded, adjusting in his seat. "I'll show you to him in a min-"

For the fifth time since Hannibal's arrival, there was a knock at the door. Jack's subordinates and co-workers had been in and out all day, and the stench of stress in the air only worsened by the minute. Hannibal was starting to get a headache, while Jack seemed ready to explode from frustration.

“Just a minute!” He bellowed at the door, and sent Hannibal a tired look. “Sorry. Ever since the start of this case, people have been going nuts here. Now that we got a guy in custody, the department staff has practically turned into the cast of *Gossip girl* . We’re still trying to keep it within the inner circle for now, but everyone wants to know what’s going on.”

“So I see,” Hannibal said, tone a bit too dismissive. The simmering irritation was getting to him; making it harder to maintain the act. Jack gave him an odd look and Hannibal deflected with a polite smile. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to get this over and done with as quickly as possible. I have a fair amount of work to deal with when I get back. Shall we?”

He stood up, and Jack gave a grunt of agreement before grabbing a manila file from his desk and stomping over to the door to open it. Hannibal took the opportunity to carefully fold his coat over his arm, before rounding the chair he’d been sitting on and coming up next to Jack. A gush of artificial pine filled the space of Jack’s office as the door flew open, scattering the documents in Jack's arms across the floor, and the person responsible made his way inside with three simple words.

“It’s not him.”

Will.

The brown hair, the narrow shoulders, the angled jaw. Will, in all his glorious, terrifying perfection.

Will swirled around, and stopped dead in his tracks when his bright blue eyes met Hannibal’s. They widened. Pupils dilated immediately, Hannibal noted. He was sure his did as well. Couldn’t be helped. No matter how well he controlled himself, there were reactions, both physical and emotional, that he would never be able to tame. The omega seemed at a complete loss for words.

Hannibal gazed at him, having perhaps underestimated just how badly he’d wanted to see the younger man, because simply *looking* at him – assessing that he was safe and well – was like drinking a pint of water after spending weeks in the desert. He noticed how Will’s throat moved as he swallowed and briefly wondered if Will’s experience mirrored his own.

Once the initial shock faded, however, Hannibal was able to register that Will was clad in the garments he’d purchased for him. The sweater. The coat. And he registered, to his complete and utter disappointment, that they reeked of beta perfume.

“Pine,” he seethed, barely aware that he was speaking. It came out as a harsh whisper, and Will’s eyes widened further before peering down at himself, expression morphing into something much more horrified. When he looked back up at Hannibal, the omega’s eyes were filled with what Hannibal recognized as pure, unadulterated misery. But while Hannibal’s first instinct was to soothe, he found himself unwilling to. Too damned hurt, too damned proud to give in to his longing, he raised his chin and gave Will a long, cold look. “Pleasure to see you again, Graham.”

Will flinched, as though he'd been slapped. Jack, thankfully busy with picking up the documents from the floor, grumbling irritably in the process, didn't seem to notice any of their mostly silent communication. The man straightened and sent Will an annoyed look.

"That was fast. Should've known you'd come rushing as soon as you saw that email. And what do you mean it's not him? Did you see him already? I told you I'd fill you in!"

Hannibal broke the stare that he and Will had been locked in and eased into his normal composure.

"I think I'll take my leave for now."

Jack sent him a confused, almost affronted look.

"Leave? I thought you'd want to see the perpetrator?"

Hannibal glanced over to where Will stood. The omega was now staring emptily at the floor, eyes still wide, arms limp along his sides. The gusto with which Will had entered the office appeared to have left him now, and the sight ached in Hannibal. But he wouldn't stay.

"You've got your profiler back. Now that Mr Graham is here, my assistance is no longer required."

Will took a shuddering breath at that. Their gazes locked once more. Will's jaw ticked as the younger man arranged his features into something hard and closed-off. The corners of Hannibal's lips lifted into a joyless smile as he threw the omega's own parting words back at him.

"As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more I can do for you."

With that, Hannibal left the office.

Jack stared after Hannibal, utterly befuddled. He then turned to his newly reinstated profiler. Will met his gaze dead-on, and the blue eyes were just as stormy and determined as Jack remember them to be. Stubborn jerk. The guy was clearly exhausted – his eyes were glossy and red. Jack briefly wondered if Will had taken the time to shower, or if the intense cologne he was wearing was an attempt to hide the fact that he hadn't. The smell now emanating from Will was weird as hell; some kind of pine, but with an undertone of sugary sweat. It made it uncomfortable to breathe around the profiler. Jack heaved a tired sigh and gestured to the chair in front of his desk, before making his way to his own.

"What do you mean, it's not him?" He sat down, waiting with forced patience for the beta to open his mouth. Will Graham had always been difficult to work with, but damnit, Jack had to

admit the guy was good. At least when he had his head on straight.

Will took a seat, looking clammier by the minute. Jack noticed. Was he coming down with something?

“I talked to him. He’s… Well, he’s sick. That much is obvious.”

“You sure *you’re* not sick? You look pretty awful.”

“I’m fine,” Will bit back. “I’m telling you, Jack, Aaron is not the perp we’re looking for. I’m not saying he’s innocent, he may well be guilty of other crimes, but not this one.”

“How do you know that? Did he tell you? Because we’ve been through countless hearings with him and he’s been able to tell us things only the killer would know. And he’s readily admitted, several times, that he’s the one behind the murders-”

“Yes, I get that, but it’s not him!”

“But how do you *know* ?” Jack raised his voice now, despite having tried so hard not to. He knew it made him seem unhinged and aggressive, but he couldn’t help it. This case had been eating away at him for far too long, they finally had a guy in custody, and in comes Will, claiming they’d gotten it all wrong. “What is it? Huh? A goddamned *hunch* ?”

“It’s never a hunch!” Will suddenly stood, slamming his hands on top of Jack’s desk. Jack stared into the defiant eyes of the younger man with a surprising sense of alarm. He’d never known Will to shy away from an argument, but he was never physically aggressive like this. Something was off with the man. Will stared back at him in contempt. “What I do, you can’t comprehend. But it’s not a hunch. I have a method, and it’s precise.”

Jack found himself struggling to find his words. Will was confident, that much was obvious. But could he be trusted?

“Alright, alright,” Jack said, putting his hands up to signal ceasefire. “Okay. I hear you. But Will, you need to be able to show us the facts.” He adopted a more sympathetic tone. “Look, I know you’re good at your job, but there is so much at stake here. You need to provide actual proof. Claiming you have a ‘method’ that you’re unable to explain doesn’t inspire confidence, and we already have a statement from a licensed therapist. If you want to make sure we don’t put away the wrong guy, you’re going to have to find something concrete that we can work with. Otherwise, Aaron is likely going to get convicted.”

Will’s head hung low as he struggled to straighten his back. At first glance, it looked as though he was simply dejected, but Jack quickly noticed the way the younger man swayed.

“Will?”

The younger man clumsily sat back down in the chair, and brought a hand up to cover his face with a groan. Jack regarded him tensely for a moment.

“You’re unwell. Probably coming down with a fever,” he said carefully. Will managed to nod and Jack sighed. “I’ll get someone to take you home. You’re in no condition to drive.”

The younger man stayed silent for a few seconds, before finding his voice again.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“I know I’m not wrong. I just need some time.”

“There’s a limit to how much I can give you,” Jack replied, eyeing the beta. “And frankly, there are other cases that need solving. Go home and get some rest for now.”

Within minutes, he’d tasked one of the younger agents to bring Will back to Wolf Trap. Once the younger man had left, Jack stretched out on top of the sofa in his office, letting his thoughts flow freely. He’d had a feeling about Chilton all along; far too egocentric, far too arrogant. Jack had known, deep down, that mistakes may have been made. That’s why he’d hoped for a second opinion from Hannibal – preferably one that supported their cause. Jack would have felt so much better about moving forward, if Hannibal had given him thumbs up. But Will seemed convinced that Aaron wasn’t the omega killer. Hannibal seemed to not want to get involved. And Jack was left in the middle, not knowing which way to go.

He sighed, and closed his eyes. After the day he’d had, he deserved a quick nap.

Will stumbled into bed, closely followed by his pack of concerned dogs. Two of the smaller ones jumped up on the mattress next to him, while the others seemed content to spread out on the floor. Will didn’t mind. He was utterly drained. He wasn’t sure if he was, in fact, coming down with a fever as Jack suspected, or if this was the result of suddenly coming face to face with Hannibal after so long. The very person he’d longed for so desperately; the broad shoulders, the scent, the very *aura* of Hannibal had rendered Will a motionless, speechless mess.

And it had hurt, immensely, to realize that the alpha was angry.

Will didn’t even have the energy to cry at this point, but the pain lingered in him. Those parting words. The cold look.

“Graham.”

He’d been demoted. Rejected. And it hurt.

Not just emotionally. Will felt the hurt on a physical level. It seared his skin, weakened his

muscles, cramped in his chest.

Will deserved all of it.

Was it irreparable? Did Will want it to be? Wasn't this what he'd wanted?

No. It wasn't. He knew that. That day, at the airport, he'd made a dire mistake. He'd been angry and frustrated. Anger breeds stupidity. People really did do the stupidest fucking things because of feelings.

One of the dogs – he couldn't tell which one – carefully licked at his knuckles. It seemed to set off something in Will, because all of a sudden, tears flowed from his eyes. Silent, warm, salty tears. And they continued streaming down, wetting his pillow, until Will passed out from sheer exhaustion.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who've read this fic before; I hope you've enjoyed this updated version. I have not, and will not make revisions to any of the following chapters. :) Please enjoy the rest of the story!

It's odd to work on a piece of fiction for over 6 years. I was very content with the early chapters when I first published them back in '18, but as time went on - and I'd like to think I've improved as a writer in that time - certain scenes and details started bothering me. I hope you don't mind. I have deeply cherished every single kind and encouraging comment I've received over the years, and I can only hope that my choice to revise chapters 1-19 (this time by making more substantial changes, i.e. removing scenes or re-writing entire dialogues) won't disappoint anyone. <3

Unravelling

Chapter Notes

:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”You understand what this procedure entails?”

Will didn’t immediately respond. He was busy watching the goldfish twirl around in the aquarium behind the stern-looking woman. Why was there only one? Wouldn’t it get lonely when its owner left the hospital to go home? Did fish get lonely?

“Mr Graham?”

Will thought of his dogs. He thought of the fact that he currently had seven, and that he never needed to worry about any of them feeling lonely. Even when Will wasn’t there, they had each other. The idea comforted him, which was a good thing, because the situation he found himself in left him feeling lonelier than he ever had.

“Yeah.”

“Are you absolutely sure you’re prepared to go through with this?” Her stern face shifted into a slightly more sympathetic one. “There are other ways, you know.”

Will regarded her with an empty sort of calmness. How easy life must be for her, he thought. A female alpha, clearly already bonded with someone, someone with whom she got to share a bed, someone who could listen to her talk about the rough days at work and the patients she hadn’t been able to help. He glanced at the ring on her finger that symbolized her bonded status, and suspected that somewhere hidden beneath the collar of her white robe, there was also a scar. She looked the progressive type.

Back in the day, alphas rarely received bonding bites from their mates. Biologically speaking, it simply wasn’t necessary. An alpha’s bite alone was enough to form an unbreakable bond. Which technically meant that if an alpha overpowered you, pushed you down and sank his or her teeth into your neck, you were permanently claimed and there was nothing you could do about it. No choice, no say in the matter.

In the last couple of decades, though, the increasingly popular opinion was that alphas should receive bites, too. Not because of some childish notion that it wasn’t *fair* that only one of them had to suffer the pain – but rather as a way to signal that their mate had willingly

entered into the bond; that they had claimed their alpha, the same way they had been claimed. It was a statement that society had moved away from the brutal ways of the past; betas and omegas had a say in who they wanted to mate with, too. It was a sign of mutual respect.

Will had always liked that idea. Even when he thought he'd never get the chance to do it himself, he approved of the notion of betas and omegas claiming their partners; demanding to have a say in the matter.

And yet, for all the progress society had made, he found himself in a doctor's office, making preparations for a procedure that he desperately needed in order to escape the wrath of his own damned biology.

"I'm sure." Will straightened in his seat, cleared his throat. "I just want to get through this heat without having to remember it afterwards." He paused. "I'll need your signature on some paperwork, though."

"Let me guess," she sighed, leaning back in her chair with a concerned, tired frown. "You don't want your employers to know why you're suddenly out of commission for five-to-six-weeks?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Lucky for you, it's not. Patient confidentiality takes priority. There's a number of discreet labels we can cover this up with. 'Prolonged hospital stay due to post-op complication' is the standard. Gets you plenty of sympathy and they can't legally terminate your employment for a mistake that was outside of your control."

Will nodded slowly.

"That'll do. Thanks, doctor."

She nodded, pressing her lips together with another frown.

"Sure. But Graham," she continued, "this isn't sustainable. You know that, right? Once is already bad enough – you can't expect us to green-light this every time you're in heat. And sooner or later, you *will* be in heat again."

"I know."

"You know, we do have a list of very capable, very professional alphas who-"

"Doctor." Will glared at her. "I've made my choice."

She gave another sigh and signed the paper she had in front of her.

"Alright. It's officially approved. Now, we don't expect your heat to arrive until the fifteenth or so, so you have nearly two weeks to prepare for this, but that's just an estimation. I would like for you to admit yourself into our care no later than the twelfth, just to be sure. Should

your heat strike earlier than expected, you need to call in immediately. If you can't make it here on your own, we'll send someone to pick you up. But that means you absolutely *have* to call us. Alright?"

"Got it."

"Alright. Guess I'll see you on the twelfth, then," she said, offering him a sympathetic, but troubled smile. Will glanced at her ring once more and was struck by how much he envied her. She never had to deal with this. She only had to watch. And then she got to return home, to the arms of her mate, where she'd feel complete.

"Why is there only one?" Will asked before he could stop himself. She gave him a confused look.

"Excuse me?"

"Your goldfish," Will clarified, sending a pointed look to the aquarium. "Why is there only one?"

She swivelled in her chair and regarded the tank for a second. She then turned to look at him.

"Does it bother you?"

"Seems cruel, is all," Will muttered.

"You think she gets lonely?"

Will shrugged. She smiled and got up from the chair, taking a few steps towards the tank, where she bent down to inspect it. After a few moments, she raised her hand and tapped her finger against one of the corners. A second goldfish emerged from behind a heap of colourful rocks and did a happy twirl. The doctor let out a fond chuckle and reached for the bottle of dried treats.

"Hey buddy, were you napping?" She cooed and sprinkled a few flakes into the water, much to the excitement of her pet fish. She turned to smile at Will. "See? They're not lonely at all."

"So it seems," Will admitted and gave her an apologetic look. Her smile turned oddly sad as she tucked her hands into her pockets.

"Interesting, that the idea of my pet fish being lonely bothers you to such an extent."

"It's interesting that I don't like the idea of animals suffering?" Will drawled, lifting an eyebrow at her.

"It's interesting, because you clearly see the value in having a partner, but you seem to completely reject the idea of having one yourself."

They stared at one another for a few seconds. So observant. Self-assured. Damned alpha. He

turned away from her with a sigh.

“See you on the twelfth,” Will said curtly, and left the room before she could respond.

The walls of the corridor were a soothing pastel blue. Beams of warm sunlight danced across the surface. He should have felt secure. Will had never particularly minded hospitals, the way others seemed to. But knowing he’d be back within a week and a half, getting ready to be chemically sedated for several weeks, he couldn’t help the way his pulse picked up speed.

Nurses smelling of chlorine walked past him. A mother reeking of stress and anxiety held a coughing toddler against her chest as she rushed by, towards the paediatricians’ wing. A priest was condoling a grief-stricken elderly woman outside the chapel. Will didn’t notice he’d stopped to look at her. The smell of a widow; dusty, powdery cinnamon. Her sobs were like stabs to his chest, each one cutting deeper. The pain of having *had* a partner. What was so good about that?

When the priest suddenly glanced up at him, Will immediately turned away and kept walking, ashamed of himself. A heavily pregnant teenage girl was seated in the café lounge, stroking both hands over her belly whilst nervously chewing on her bottom lip. Will briefly wondered if she was bonded. She was too far away for him to smell anything on her, and she had a scarf around her neck. A couple of tables away sat an elderly beta, carefully stirring sugar into the coffee cup in front of him. Was he a widower, too? Or had he spent his life in solitude? What was the point of it all?

Once he finally got out of the building and reached his car, it took him a few minutes to calm down enough to remember how to ignite the engine.

At least he had his dogs waiting for him back home.

That was something, and it was enough, he’d tell himself. Over and over again. And it’d be a lie.

It wasn’t enough.

Hannibal’s heel tapped irritably against the floor as he met Bedelia’s steady gaze. It irked him, that she was so calm, so secure. Her eyes were half-lidded, icy irises cutting right into him from where she sat, chin slightly raised. And his bobbing knee wasn’t nearly as intimidating as he needed it to be.

“Is this your new method?” Hannibal finally said. “Silent therapy? I could have managed this on my own, then.”

“I was merely waiting for you to break the silence. Your body language tells me you’re under a certain amount of stress today. I didn’t want to rush you.”

Hannibal pressed his teeth together and forced his leg to cease its movements, with some effort. Bedelia noticed. She gave something akin to a smile and crossed one leg over the other, elegant as ever.

“How are you sleeping?”

“As expected.”

“Elaborate.”

“Like you said, I’ve been under some stress.”

“And why is that?” She scribbled something down in her notebook. Hannibal hated being on the receiving end of this. He’d always known how to manipulate his therapists in the past, but Bedelia had always been sharper than the rest, and it left him feeling unnerved. Raw, and naked.

When Hannibal didn’t immediately respond, or even retort with some witty diversion, the way he did when she broached topics that he didn’t feel like discussing with her, she scribbled in her notebook once more. Hannibal felt his eyebrows inch closer together. She knew exactly how to put pressure on him without explicitly saying anything.

“I’ve been-“ Hannibal paused, suddenly unsure of what to say. How much he was willing to divulge to her. She quirked an eyebrow at him, expectantly. When he didn’t continue, she leaned forward, placing her elbows on her thigh.

“Let me remind you that I took an oath of silence. Whatever’s on your mind, it’ll stay in this room.”

“That’s not what you said last time,” Hannibal shot back and instantly regretted it. He’d just inadvertently admitted that the cause of his stress was Will Graham; his former patient.

Bedelia gave him a look that was caught somewhere between surprised and victorious.

“So it is about the pretend-beta. *You* told me last time that you’d be careful around him.” She cocked her head to one side. “What did you do, Icarus?”

Hannibal took a deep, steadying breath and managed to slip a calmer mask in place. He mirrored her by crossing his own leg over the other and folded his hands neatly in his lap. She picked up on it and raised her chin, leaning back slightly.

“I was worried about him and got too personally involved. Simple as that. Let me assure you, however, that whatever personal relationship we had, is now over.”

Bedelia’s eyes widened slightly.

“When you say *relationship*…” She breathed, and Hannibal gave her a reprimanding look.

“Bedelia, please. Think better of me.” He sighed. “I’d never cross that line with a patient. Though I would like to point out that he is not.”

“He’s not… what?”

“A patient. Well, *my* patient. Miss Bloom has replaced me.”

Bedelia seemed to a relax a fraction, but Hannibal still enjoyed having the upper hand.

“I see. Well. Pardon me. For a second, I must admit, I feared you’d overstepped.” She cleared her throat and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Does it bother you that you’ve been replaced?”

“Not particularly. It was necessary.”

“How so? Were your sessions with Graham proving unfruitful?”

“Quite the opposite.”

The caught each other gazes once more. Bedelia’s was hard and unrelenting. Hannibal kept his calm mask in place, but he realized he’d spoken without thinking. Again. Damnit.

“Elaborate.”

“What I mean is that our sessions were going well, but ultimately, we both felt that miss Bloom was a better fit, seeing as she works closer to the FBI. She has more experience helping traumatized agents.”

“I don’t believe you.” Bedelia raised an elegant eyebrow. “You’ve worked alongside the FBI for months, I don’t see how Alana Bloom is better qualified to determine how mentally fit an agent is. And while Bloom is extraordinarily skilled when it comes to treating PTSD, it also happens to be one of *your* main areas of expertise.”

“She and Graham have known each other for many years, he simply felt more at ease-“

“No,” Bedelia interrupted him. “See, now I’m starting to feel offended. Do you think I’m a fool? Having a pre-existing personal relationship with a patient would only make her a *less* suited candidate. I suggest you stop lying to me, because believe it or not, I am here to help you.”

Hannibal stayed quiet for a few moments, waiting impatiently for his brain to come up with a solution, an excuse, a lie convincing enough to get her to back off. Nothing came to him. Nothing at all. He felt… empty. All that remained was the truth.

“To answer your first question,” he drawled suddenly, breaking the silence again. “I’m barely sleeping at all these days.”

Bedelia blinked at him, eyebrows drawing together briefly in surprise, before she found her

footing and scribbled down her notes in her notebook.

“What’s keeping you awake?”

Hannibal took a second to angle his jaw to the side, stretching out the stiff muscles in his neck.

“Agonising frustration, unlike anything I’ve ever felt,” was his matter-of-factly response.

Hannibal stared grimly at her. It was cathartic, being this honest with a fellow therapist. Getting to finally put the misery he experienced into words. But it also brought a very real pain and a very real rage to the surface. And he was exceedingly uncomfortable with the idea of her actually *knowing* something about him. Something *real*. For a second, he considered killing her as soon as their session was over. Rip her throat out. Cut out those frightfully observant eyes of hers. His last three hunts had done absolutely *nothing* to alleviate his stress, but Bedelia was, after all, different. She’d make a good stew.

Bedelia stared back at him, just as grimly. But there was a careful softness in her voice as she spoke.

“What happened between you and Will Graham?”

Hannibal sent her a smile that he knew looked just as hollow as he felt.

“I flew too close, Bedelia. And then I fell.”

Will inhaled deeply, curling in on himself where he lay. The dusty scent of the couch cushions irritated his nose, but it was familiar, and it steadied him somehow. He needed that. Needed to be steadied. He inhaled again, closed his eyes. Felt a wet snout press into his back, heard the whine that came out of it. Without opening his eyes, Will stretched out his arm and searched with his hand until his fingers met the soft fur that he instantly recognized as Winston’s. He gave the dog a pat that he hoped was comforting.

He remained in his curled-up position for a few minutes, breathing and waiting for the worst of it to pass. The dizzy spells came frequently now, accompanied by a longing so intense it made him want to succumb to… something. Death, maybe. They the consequence of getting close to an alpha – which in turn had caused his hormone production to go haywire with the expectation of actually having a partner for the approaching heat – the one thing Will had always denied himself – only for it all to get torn away. The closeness, the scenting, the safety. All of it, gone over night.

Will was going through withdrawal. That was really the only word he could use to label the hell he was in.

He eventually uncurled himself and sat up with great effort, head spinning and nausea playing at the back of his throat. Dazedly, he looked around until he localized the whiskey bottle under the table. Three generous sips, no four, before he turned back to his laptop.

The cold light from the screen lit up his otherwise depressing living room, which looked about as neat and tidy as one might expect from someone who was well and truly losing his grip on reality. Will didn't even know what day it was, let alone what time. He threw a glance to the window. It was dark outside. Night, then.

Will's vision turned blurry as he stared at the documents he had on there. Statements made by the victim's families, mostly. Autopsy reports, telling him things he already knew. Nothing new, nothing that would lead to a break-through – especially with Will's brain swimming in a toxic concoction of booze and angry pre-heat hormones, rendering it a soggy mess.

He registered, for a second, that his phone was buzzing. It had been doing that every now and again for a while, but he just couldn't summon the strength to retrieve it from the kitchen. And he was not looking forward to having to tell Jack that he'd yet to find anything. Jack had made it clear that they were running out of time. Will needed to keep at it. Just needed to keep working.

Will sank back into the couch, took another sip from the bottle. Felt empty, and yet so full. Tried to disconnect from his body, because of the lingering aches. His head hurt, his eyes stung, there was a strange cutting sensation in his mid-section. When was the last time he ate? What did he eat? He couldn't for the life of him remember.

Will closed his eyes for a minute. Opened them. Tried sitting up straight. His muscles protested. What time was it? He turned his gaze back to the screen.

Right, statements. Read through them again. There's got to be something. Something that he'd missed, that would allow him to connect the dots. Something that tied the victims together, something that would lead to a suspect, *something*.

He was so tired though. Will didn't even know what day it was, let alone what time. He peered towards the window. It was bright outside. Day, then.

Will took another swig from the bottle and mindlessly scrolled through the documents on his laptop.

There's got to be *something*.

Anything.

Alana drove much faster than she knew was allowed on the twisting roads that led to Wolf Trap. She was normally such a careful driver, wouldn't even drive five miles over the speed

limit, but she couldn't help the feeling that she desperately needed to hurry. Still, it wasn't without fearful flutters in her stomach that she sped through the curves, biting her lip in the process.

Thankfully, Wolf Trap was reclusive enough for the roads to remain mostly empty. She made it through – though not without her heart racing – and slowed down as she pulled up on the driveway outside Will's house. She grabbed her handbag and stepped out of her car, taking the building in. She'd only been there a handful of times before, and she couldn't remember it looking so… rugged. Like nobody lived there. Like it was haunted.

Concern gripped at her heart at the thought. *Haunted*.

Alana had been trying to get a hold of Will for several days. He'd missed his last appointment, and when she called Jack to ask if he'd been at work, she found out that Will had only briefly stopped by last week to announce that he needed time to work on the case, and that he'd looked sick. "*A walking corpse*" were the exact words Jack had used.

As she stood outside the house, hearing nothing but the rustle of leaves from the surrounding vegetation, Alana was struck by the very fearful notion that maybe that's what was awaiting her inside. A corpse. Will hadn't been steady – truly steady – in years. The last few months had been especially bad, and the last week extraordinarily so. Will wasn't picking up his phone. Not even when Jack gave it a try, which was virtually unheard of. Will never missed a chance to discuss his work.

Alana sucked in a breath and stepped up on the porch, before giving the door a knock, ignoring the way her heart slammed itself against her ribcage.

Please answer the door. Please answer the door. Please, please, please…

She knocked again, firmer this time, and was rewarded with movement from inside. Four or five dogs of various sizes and colours ran up to the door, yapping and jumping around in front of the door like they were beside themselves. Now far more worried than she'd been a few minutes ago, Alana gripped the doorknob – which was locked. She huffed a frustrated sigh and looked around. One of the windows that she knew led to the kitchen was open, and she only hesitated for a second before deciding to reach in and get it open all the way, so that she could climb in.

She got onto the kitchen table, which was placed right in front of the window and paused for a second, taking the state of the kitchen in, before placing her feet on the floor. The odour in there wasn't exactly foul – it was just the smell of whoever-lived-there-not-giving-a-fuck. Dirty dishes, rotting fruit in a bowl, stale coffee. The dogs' food bowls did have some food left in them, she noticed. That was a relief. She found it hard to believe that the large number of dogs in Will's home wouldn't have finished those bowls off in a matter of a day or two, so Will must have refilled them relatively recently – but then again, what the hell did she know about dogs?

"Will?" She waited for a second but got no response. The dogs flocked around her, and while Alana had very limited experience communicating with canines, she did interpret their body

language as them trying to show her the way. Alana breathed in deeply, before following the dogs into the living room.

It looked and smelled like hell in there, and Alana noticed several empty liquor bottles haphazardly cast away in a corner, along with clothes and books and old papers. The stench of booze and sweat was palpable, but there was something else as well. Something she didn't immediately recognize, because it simply wasn't in her nature to pick up on it. But as soon as she noticed it, it overpowered everything else.

... Omega?

Barely having had the time to consider what this could possibly mean, she heard a soft groan from behind her, and she flipped around with a startled gasp.

Will peered up at her from the couch, where he was curled up into a shivering ball under a rather damp-looking blanket. He was drenched in sweat, dark hair clinging to his forehead, and the pale shade of his skin made the bags under his eyes look a stark and worrying shade of purple. Alana was immediately torn between shock and worry, and the fact that it seemed to take him a few moments to recognize her made it worse.

"Alana?" His voice was a mere raspy whisper, and Alana noticed that he was hugging a whiskey bottle close to his chest.

"Will," she breathed, fighting to snap out of the shock. "What the hell… what are you… *Jesus*, Will!" The last bit came out a snarl, teetering on a sob. It hurt, seeing him like this. She took a few steps closer and crouched down in front of him, fighting desperately to swallow the lump in her throat. "You scared the absolute shit out of me." She raised a hand and carefully placed it on his shoulder. He didn't flinch away from her touch, but rather leaned into it. A pained sound escaped him and Alana's heart nearly broke when she registered the look of agony on his face.

"I messed everything up," he mumbled. "I can't solve it, and I can't solve *me*, and everything's just gone to hell," he continued in a confusing flurry, shaking his head.

"It'll be okay," she said, keeping her tone hushed and soothing, the only way she knew how. She didn't know exactly what he was talking about – and she didn't need to. Not right now. That wasn't her priority. A motherly, or perhaps sisterly instinct that she hadn't known she had in her kicked in, and she carefully took the half-empty whiskey bottle from Will and put it on the table next to her. "Let's get you cleaned up, yeah? And then get some food in you. You look like you haven't eaten in days."

Will kept his gaze low, still seeming a bit out of it.

"What… day is it?" He finally asked.

"It's Thursday. The ninth," she explained, keeping her voice calm. Will sucked in a breath.

"I missed my appointment."

“Yeah. That’s why I’m here. I was worried.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. Can you get up?”

Will nodded and did eventually manage to stand up, with some help from Alana. Once she was sure he was capable of washing himself off in the shower unsupervised, she searched the kitchen for foods that hadn’t yet decayed and was eventually able to heat up some canned soup for Will.

He emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, thankfully wrapped up in a bathrobe, and took a seat by the table without saying anything. She placed the soup bowl she’d prepared in front of Will, and he started eating without a word. She took a seat on the other side of the table and simply watched him eat. The therapist in her knew that this was not the time to be pressing him for an explanation. This was the time to be patient.

Will finished the bowl and pushed it away from him. A shiver seemed to go through him, and he turned his gaze to the window, crossing his arms over his chest and pressing one hand across his lower face, as if in thought. But it looked more, to Alana, as though he was dreading having to open his mouth; afraid of the words that would have to leave him. The shower and the soup appeared to have sobered him up a bit. But it still took many, many minutes before he eventually dropped his hand.

“I, uh-…“ He paused to clear his throat. His voice was still raspy. “I’m sorry to have worried you.”

“You say that as if I’m no longer worried.” Will still refused to look at her. She leaned forward a bit. “I still am. Very much so. And I think,” she paused for a moment, hesitating, not wanting to set him off. “I think there are things we need to talk about. Things *you* need to talk about.”

Will did flinch at that. Seemed to deflate, implode. Alana took a steadying breath.

“Will,” she said, keeping her voice soft. “Are you in pre-heat?”

The muscles in Will’s throat twisted as he swallowed. It looked painful, like he was trying to get a rusty spike down. But eventually, still without looking at her, he nodded.

“Okay.” Alana nodded, too. “I’m glad I finally know what’s going on with you. Is there a reason you aren’t using suppressants?”

“They stopped working,” he sighed – an exhausted, miserable sound. “I took too many of ‘em and they just… stopped working.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I think you know.”

He finally turned to look at her, eyes glossy, full of pain and withheld anger. Alana pressed her lips together as she stared back. Eventually, she released the tight breath she’d been holding.

“Yeah. I guess I do.”

As awful as it was, it made sense. Will lived for his work at the FBI, and they didn’t exactly have a surplus of omegas on their staff. He must’ve thought it was the only way. And it broke her heart.

They sat in contemplative silence for a minute. Will’s dogs watched them cautiously from a few feet away. She could practically smell their anxiety and worry for Will in the air.

“When do you think your heat is due?”

“I don’t know,” Will admitted, lowering his gaze to the empty soup bowl. “A couple of days, maybe a week. It’s hard to tell. I haven’t had to go through one in years.”

“Wow, okay. So do you have a partner? Or I could help you find-“

“I’ve arranged for induced coma.”

Alana gaped at him.

“Induced coma? Will, that’s-“

“The only way.”

“It’s not the only way! Christ, you’d be out for weeks! Maybe even months!” Alana couldn’t keep her voice soft any longer. “And the rehabilitation is-“

“I know. But it’s what I’ve decided.”

“But having a partner would-“

“I don’t have a partner.”

“Yes, but I could help you find some-“

“I don’t want one.”

“Will, don’t be stupid, you need an alpha for this!”

Will suddenly slammed his fists down on the table and his voice fell into a growl.

“I KNOW THAT! And I *had* an alpha, alright?” Will’s breath came out shaky as he glared at

her, eyes wide. She stared back at him, at a complete loss for words. Will slowly came down from his angry burst, shoulders dropping down, eyes reddening. “I had… I had someone. And now, I… I don’t want anyone else. Can’t stand the thought of it.”

“What happened? Why isn’t he-”

“I messed up.” Will swallowed, shaking his head. “I messed up, pushed him away… Told him I didn’t need him.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because he… got too close. And I let him in, and…” His voice thinned out. Will leaned forward, propping his elbows up on the table and buried his face in his hands. Alana regarded him, sympathy aching in every inch of her, because Will looked so damned lost. So confused and regretful and broken. The profiler straightened in his seat, crossed his arms over his chest once more, and seemed to struggle to calm himself down. Eventually, he found his voice again.

“When I found out that they’d arrested this other guy and that my theory had been disproven, it felt as though everything had been ripped away from me… and I ended up blaming him.”

“Blaming him?”

“Yeah. For distracting me, redirecting my focus towards things that… I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. I fucked up, that’s what’s important. He was trying to help me, and I practically spat in his face.”

Alana regarded the omega calmly from where she sat, though her brain was already starting to connect certain dots. Will wasn’t known for being a social butterfly – he avoided having to spend time with other people whenever he could. Finding out that he’d spent enough time with an alpha to get affected like this – to get *attached* like this – truly surprised her.

But once the initial shock died down, she realized that there was really only one alpha she could think of. One alpha, with whom Will had spent enough time with recently, that could possibly have this effect on Will. One alpha who could possibly understand the workings of Will’s mind, to the extent where he’d been willing to accept help and closeness and the prospect of a future partnership.

She thought back to that time she’d gone to visit him in his office. Will had been there, and he hadn’t been happy to see her. She’d thought that was strange, and while his excuse had seemed plausible at first, knowing what she knew now, she understood that it was just that: an excuse. He hadn’t been there to reassure his former therapist – he’d been there to see his alpha.

She also remembered bringing said alpha up during her first appointment with Will. Hinting that she was interested. She remembered what Will had said to her. It had seemed so damned cruel then, but in the light of what she’d just learned, she understood. Those were his possessive instincts, working desperately to get her to back off.

“Hannibal?” She made sure not to sound accusatory and waited patiently for Will to look at her. When he did, she could see the guilt crashing around behind the soft blue of his irises.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Alana gave a rueful, comforting smile.

“You silly man.”

Alana thought back to the time she ran into Hannibal outside the BSU headquarters the week prior. She remembered him asking about Will, she remembered bringing up the alleged courtship, and she remembered the way he’d stiffened, the way his eyes darkened. Almost as if the courtship had ended – badly.

In retrospect, Alana felt stupid. It all seemed so obvious now.

“You should go see him.”

“He doesn’t want to see me,” Will muttered, shaking his head stubbornly. “The things I said… I broke something between us. Pretty sure the damage is done, permanently.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I told him I didn’t need him. That there was nothing else he could do for me,” Will retorted, sneering at himself. “I said that, to an *alpha*. To *my* alpha. Do you even comprehend how decimating that is?”

“I do. I’m a psychologist,” she pointed out, tone dry. “But Will, you’re going to need him for this. You’re spiralling.”

“He’s not going to-“

“I’m sure he will.”

“I pushed him away.”

“So pull him back in.”

Will looked up at her – confusion, fear and a shy spark of hope lighting up in his face. She raised an eyebrow at him and smiled.

“You’re his omega, Will. He needs you just as much as you need him.”

“I… I don’t know,” Will shook his head and wrapped his arms around himself.

“I saw him last week. From what I could tell, he’s not happy about the way things ended.”

“Of course he’s not,” Will groaned, dragging a hand across his face in agony. “Did you not just hear me?”

“He asked about you, though. It was like he couldn’t help himself,” Alana pressed. “Look, I’m not saying he’s fine with everything or that he’s waiting for you with open arms, but he is clearly still attached to you. The bond you’ve already managed to form won’t magically snap, just from a fight. If anything, depending on what you choose to do now, it might just make it stronger. But in order for that to happen, you gotta be a little bit vulnerable.”

He gave her a long-suffering look and she released an amused huff.

“Yeah, I know you hate that. But that’s the thing. You have to be willing to put in the work, Will. Life doesn’t just magically work out the way you want it to, you’re not just handed things. Are you waiting for someone to fix this *for* you?”

That got his attention. Will looked like she’d struck him, eyes wide and lips pressing tightly together. She continued.

“That’s just not the Will I know. You hate having other people sort out your messes. And an induced coma? That sounds a lot like running away. Are you someone who runs away, Will?”

A minute or two went by. Alana wanted to give Will the time he needed to reach a conclusion, without too much nudging and prodding. She watched his facial expression slowly shift from stubbornly doubtful, to anxiously longing. He cleared his throat.

“I’m still a little bit drunk, so…” Will hesitated. “Could you drive?

Alana smiled.

“Go get dressed.”

It was appropriately raining by the time Alana pulled up outside Hannibal’s estate. Will stared at the house, anxiety and fear knocking around in his chest.

The pep talk Alana had given him back in the kitchen had been so convincing, and he’d been intoxicated just enough for a spark of hope to ignite in his gut. He’d gotten dressed, combed his hair, all while grasping onto that tiny spark, like it was his only lifeline. Letting go of it meant tumbling right back into the pitch darkness where he’d spent the last few days, and he didn’t want that. He didn’t want to go back. He wanted to see Hannibal. *Desperately* wanted to see him.

And yet, the drive had taken long enough for him to sober up and the fear had already started digging its claws into him. It suddenly didn’t seem like a good idea at all. It actually seemed like a really shitty idea. Like he might vomit. Or pass out. Or both.

“Hey,” Alana broke the silence. He looked over at her, and she gave him an encouraging look. “He wants to see you. I guarantee it.”

“He’s going to slam the door in my face,” Will retorted, hearing his own voice waver.

“Yeah, maybe,” Alana said, and he gave her a look of horror, to which she responded with a huff of laughter. “Jesus, don’t look at me like that. What I mean is, yes – he might be angry. It’s very plausible. You’ve said some truly hurtful things to him.”

“This is a wonderful boost for my confidence,” Will said dryly.

“But he still *cares*, Will. And you need to show him that you care, too. That’s what this is all about. Sorting out your mess. Damage control. See how he responds and take it from there. He might be angry, yeah. He might slam the door in your face. But that’s still a first step toward healing.”

Will sent her a tired glare.

“You’re such a therapist.”

“Is that supposed to hurt my feelings?” She smirked at him and made a gesture towards the house. “Go on, get out of here. I did my part. It’s up to you, now. And look, if it really goes south, just call me. I’ll come get you.”

Will nodded, took a deep breath and exited the car. Watched it drive away, and was immediately struck by the overwhelming sensation of regret. He looked up at the estate. The sun was beginning to set, turning the sky a cloudy mess of grey and purple. The rain was icy against his skin.

And then, he somehow found the strength to take a step towards the house. And then another, and another. The thought of seeing Hannibal terrified him, but the alternative was still worse. The pitch-black misery of pain and longing and no longer having the will or the drive to take care of himself because it all seemed so damned pointless…

When Alana showed up earlier, he’d been so out of it that he hadn’t recognized her at first. He hadn’t known what day it was, or when he last ate. Now that he was sober and alert, he realized just how close to the edge he’d allowed himself to drift, and that truly frightened him. He needed someone to steady him. He needed Hannibal.

Will had gotten all the way to Hannibal’s front door. He remembered the first time he’d been there. Nervous, excited, wearing his old two-piece. Hannibal must’ve hated that suit. Still, it had been an interesting night. The official beginning of their so-called courtship. The one that wasn’t supposed to actually *lead* anywhere. But it had led him right back here.

With his heart pounding heavily in his chest, from fear and longing and everything in-between, he raised his hand to the door knocker and knocked it against the metal plate attached to the wood. The sound it produced was sharp, and Will nearly flinched away. No

going back now. He heard footsteps approach from inside. Will struggled to keep his breathing even. When the door finally swung open, he was rewarded with a warm gush of scents so wonderful, so unbelievably enticing that it nearly brought tears to his eyes. Bergamot, green tea, steel.

Hannibal stared down at him, still with his hand on the doorknob. The man was clad in a soft-looking pair of chinos and a cotton shirt under a black cardigan. Hair swept back. So casual, so unlike the Hannibal Will was used to seeing, but still so painfully attractive. Every inch of Will's body screamed at him to draw closer to the alpha, but he remained still. Didn't want to cross any boundaries. Not until he knew how Hannibal felt about him being there.

For a few seconds, neither said a word. Will was simply too stunned to remember how his mouth worked, but the reason behind Hannibal's silence was harder to interpret. Was he as shocked to see him? Or was he silently furious?

Will managed to swallow and find his voice.

"Hannibal." It came out a broken whisper, but loud enough for the alpha to hear him, because he blinked, appearing to snap out of whatever shock he'd been in. Still, he said nothing. So Will continued. "May I come in?"

Hannibal seemed to consider his request for a moment, before stepping aside to make room for Will. The omega stepped into the warm hallway, shivering from the dampness of his clothes – and from the whirlwind of emotions he was experiencing. Will wrapped his arms around himself in an effort to regain some control. It was challenging, being so close to the alpha, and still unable to touch. And he desperately wanted to touch.

Hannibal closed the door and turned to look at him, expression closed-off and chilly. When their eyes met, Will was sure he saw a flash of pain in Hannibal's.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, voice not carrying properly. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm sorry for… everything. I said things to you that I wish I never had. Blamed you for things that weren't your fault. Cast you aside, when you…" He took a steadying breath. "When you were the one thing that kept me afloat. The one person who believed in me. Like an idiot. I walked away, like a goddamned idiot." His voice broke again, and he couldn't bear looking into Hannibal's eyes, afraid of what he might see there. He felt his own eyes start to sting as his gaze fell to the floor. "I miss you… so much that it sickens me."

The minute it took for Hannibal to work up a response felt like a goddamned year.

"You're in pre-heat," said the alpha at long last, voice subdued from withheld emotions. "Your instincts are what makes you sick. That's the only reason you're here."

Will felt the floor start to undulate beneath him.

"What?"

"I can smell how far along you are," Hannibal said, tone neutral. "Instinct clouds our

judgement."

"Hannibal-"

"When you told me there was nothing else I could do for you, you were in full control of yourself." The look Hannibal sent him was hard – still, the pain lingered in his gaze. "It was a decision you made, while you were still able to think straight. Why should I take anything you say seriously now that you're practically at the threshold of your heat?"

Will felt like he'd been punched in the face. Dizzy from the onslaught of emotions, he swayed on his feet. Tears threatened to spill over any second. And something snapped in him.

"Don't you dare blame this on my goddamned pre-heat." He felt his face twist into a snarl. "You always think you know me better than I know myself. Let me tell you some things that you clearly missed. The breakfast you brought me that one time? Our therapy sessions? And the courtship? The goddamned *deal* we struck? All of it messed me up. It messed me *up*, Hannibal. I've been around alphas all my life and never had a problem, but you did something to me that I think is irreparable. You knocked something loose. It's done. It's permanent. The way I feel about you, the way I want you to grab hold of me and claim me and the way I want to give myself up to you, and only you… All of that…"

Will didn't realize he'd been stepping closer to Hannibal while he was talking. He was now only mere feet away from the alpha, whose facial expression had turned into one of astonishment.

"All of that, I *felt*, long before my pre-heat. I just didn't understand what it meant."

Hannibal's breathing came faster now, as he gazed down at Will, pupils blown.

"Tell me, what does it mean?"

The roughness in the alpha's voice sent shivers down Will's spine, made his mouth water. Arousal churned deep within him, made his skin sear and tingle as he inched closer to the man. When he spoke, his voice came out husky, tone longing.

"It means that I need you. I need to belong to you. I need it so bad. Can't fucking *stand* being apart from you."

Something finally seemed to snap in Hannibal as well, because his hands shot out to grab Will's hips, and before Will knew what was happening, Hannibal had leaned down to press his jaw against Will's.

Completely dumbstruck and high on the endorphins that flooded his system, Will buried his fists into Hannibal's shirt and pressed himself closer to the alpha, eyes closing in sheer bliss as he inhaled deeply. The tears finally spilled over in relief, when finally, *finally*, their scents mingled together in the gorgeous concoction that was uniquely *them* – the one that Will needed in order to function. They were caramel and bergamot and green tea and whiskey.

Will couldn't stop. It was physically impossible to remove himself from Hannibal, having deprived himself of the man's touch and closeness and scent for so long that in retrospect, it seemed a miracle that he'd even survived. Brain completely void of thoughts that weren't explicitly focused on Hannibal, Will pressed hungry lips against the man's throat, dragged his tongue over the alpha's pulse point, relished in the way it sped up. A groan escaped him when Hannibal's hands tightened almost painfully around his hips, shifted their positions, and shoved Will up against the wall. The alpha only leaned back for a second, in order to press his mouth against Will's, biting at the omega's lower lip in a way that had Will's head swimming.

Clinging to Hannibal's strong shoulders, Will thrusted his lower half up against Hannibal's body and let out a needy sound as his pulsating erection pressed up against Hannibal's equally hard cock. An intoxicating kind of hunger Will that had never dared to embrace before opened up in him, created a space that he desperately needed filled. And while the fear of the past still had a hold on him, still echoed from somewhere deep inside, Will was too far gone this time. Too far gone to care.

Hannibal's hands came up under his shirt, palms stroking over his back, and the touch left Will's skin feeling electrified. One hand remained there, holding Will firmly in place, while the other one made its way down to his crotch. Will broke free of the kiss in order to gasp for air when Hannibal's fingers brushed against the tent, working on the fly. Once open, Hannibal inched Will's pants down just enough to release his dick. Will threw his head back with a hiss and Hannibal pressed closer, burying his nose against Will's shoulder as he wrapped his fingers around Will's erection and started to pump.

Will dug his fingers into Hannibal's back, holding on for dear life as the pleasure that tore through him made his knees buckle. Hannibal held him up, like he weighed nothing, and continued pumping Will's dick, slowly building up a rhythm that left the omega a quivering mess. Will shook his head.

"You…" He managed, completely out of breath, "you, too. Please. I want…"

"What do you want, *mielasis*?" Hannibal murmured softly into his ear. Will struggled to remember how his tongue worked, but eventually managed to formulate his wishes.

"I want to see you… feel you…" Will's right hand let go of its death grip on Hannibal's shoulder and blindly made its way down to Hannibal's crotch, where the evidence of the alpha's arousal fought against the fabric of the chinos. Hannibal winced softly as he shifted to make room for Will to tug the zipper down, releasing Hannibal's cock. Will brushed his fingers against it, exploring the length and the warmth of the organ, felt his own dick jump at the prospect of pressing up against it.

Hannibal appeared to understand what he wanted, despite the broken sentence, because he suddenly gripped both of them and resumed pumping, with Will's dick now straining directly against Hannibal's. His alpha's. He let his head fall back, slowly coming undone.

The hand that was propping him up travelled south and took a firm grasp of Will's ass, pressing them even closer together as the movements of Hannibal's fist gradually sped up,

and became erratic. Will's breath came out in staccato-like huffs as he dug his fingers deeper into Hannibal's shoulders and felt his toes curl within his shoes. Hannibal released a series of soft hisses through his teeth, his breath hot against Will's ear. Will's head snapped forward and he pressed his lips against the bend between Hannibal's neck and shoulder as he finally fell over the edge with a muffled, high-pitched cry.

Hannibal slammed his lower body into Will's with a satisfied groan as he, too, reached climax. The alpha continued rocking into Will, until they were both completely spent. Once they'd stilled, Hannibal kept Will pressed against the wall for a while longer, softly pressing his lips against Will's neck, his temple, his earlobe, until everything inside of Will wanted to cry.

They slowly separated. Searched each other's gaze. Silently asking one another if everything was alright. Because what just happened was rather profound – for both of them.

Will shivered against Hannibal, his body experiencing an alien, satisfied kind of exhaustion. His mind was reeling from what he'd just done. What *they'd* done. A line had been crossed. A line he used to think he'd never cross. Will half-expected himself to start panicking at any second. Judging by the way Hannibal carefully observed him, he wasn't the only one. But the minutes went by. Satisfaction and relief lingered in his system and Will sent the alpha a soft look.

"Christ, I missed you."

Hannibal's shoulders seemed to relax a fraction, and he nodded, eyes now calm and steady.

"Likewise."

Their foreheads came together, eyes closed, and for the next few minutes, they simply breathed each other in. Making up for lost time, relishing in what was uniquely them.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed. :)

Mending

Chapter Notes

> Fuck me, I'm so nervous about this. It's literally been years since my last update - sorry about that, by the way - and I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a little bit rusty. I hope you'll still enjoy this chapter. I'm essentially just trying to pick up where we left off.
> I have other stories in mind that I'd like to start working on, but I'm not one for leaving on-going stories unfinished. I just take very long, unplanned hiatuses instead. Like an asshole. What I'm trying to say is, I'm still here, I'm still working on this, and I have every intention of wrapping this up as neatly as I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will sighed with contentment as he stepped out of the shower, the second one he'd taken in just the span of a few hours - hours that, as it happened, had turned into something much more eventful than he'd anticipated. Earlier that day, he'd been semi-unconscious on his couch, drunk, miserable and driven half-mad with longing and self-loathing. Now, he was clean, warm and wrapping himself up in a bathrobe that smelled of bergamot and steel. With satisfaction lingering in his veins, and not a trace of panic so far.

Will was still apprehensive, though. He bizarrely had the strong urge to look over his shoulder just to see if the ghost of his anxiety stood behind him, ready to strike when he wasn't expecting it. Except he *was* expecting it. But there was nothing.

He glanced at the mirror and could only barely make out the shape of himself on the foggy surface. He dragged a hand across the glass and took a better look at himself. The shadows under his eyes were still there, of course. But his eyes seemed brighter, more alert and awake than they'd been in several days. There was a healthy, rosy shine to his skin that definitely hadn't been there the previous days. Memories of what had happened between Hannibal and himself a mere half hour ago flooded his senses and sent shivers across his skin, leaving it almost humming with gratification.

He stared at himself, watched a flare of bewildered disbelief dance across his features.

Was *this* what he had been denying himself all these years? Was this what the demons of his past had kept him from pursuing? What his father had warned him about - made him feel ashamed for yearning?

What the hell?

What the hell had he been so afraid of?

A sudden and mercifully brief wave of intense fury and sadness overcame him at the realization that he'd spent the better part of his life fearing and resisting something that made him feel so *unbelievably* good.

Turning away from his reflection, Will dragged his hands through his still-wet hair, pulled the robe closer around himself, and exited the luxurious bathroom. The shower had been necessary, what with Will having arrived damp and cold from the rain, and a few minutes later finding himself covered in sweat, slick and cum. Unfortunately, having to shower also meant washing himself clean of the very scent he'd only *just* reclaimed, after spending several days being so intensely desperate for it that it had nearly driven him insane. Now, smelling predominantly of ridiculously expensive body wash - even if it did belong to Hannibal - frustrated him to an almost outrageous degree. The bathrobe only helped a little.

Will immediately noticed the smell of food being cooked in the air and steered towards the kitchen. As he got closer, the hiss of Hannibal's frying pan became clearer. Will lingered at the doorframe for a second, just to take the sight in. Hannibal, having changed into a clean pair of flannel pants and a white t-shirt, was by the stove, half turned away from Will. He gripped the frying pan and gave it a firm tug, making the sizzling contents jump. Will took a careful step into the room. Hannibal noticed and turned to look at him. Slight tension was back in his shoulders, facial expression settled into something guarded.

Will hated knowing that the cautious expression was his fault. The harsh words he left Hannibal with that day at the airport would have resulted in wounds that hadn't yet had the chance to heal - despite what had taken place in Hannibal's hallway half an hour ago.

Without saying anything, Will approached the alpha, placed himself right next to him, and with a sigh, pressed his cheek against Hannibal's firm upper arm. After a moment, feeling uncharacteristically bold, he raised one hand to Hannibal's back, stroking down until it settled on the man's waist. Closed his eyes in the blissful contentment that immediately settled in his chest, simply from being close to the man.

"Smells good."

Hannibal waited briefly before he responded, tone deceptively casual.

"Normally I would've made more of an effort if I knew you'd be stopping by for dinner, but for now, I hope bacon and zucchini will suffice."

"Sure." Will paused. Swallowed. Gathered his courage. "That's not what I meant, though." He shifted his body closer to the man, dragging his cheek against Hannibal's sleeve while letting his hand press more firmly against the strong back. He felt the muscles momentarily stiffen and shift under his fingers as the alpha twisted in his embrace. For the briefest of moments, Will was afraid Hannibal was stepping away from him, but instead a strong arm reached around to land a warm hand at the small of Will's back.

“Oh?” Hannibal’s voice was a low timbre. “Perhaps you should clarify. Was there something you wanted?”

Will looked up at him, trying to assess Hannibal’s mood. The alpha wasn’t exactly smiling at him, and the tension was still very much present in his shoulders, but there was a challenging glint in Hannibal’s deep brown eyes that made Will practically ache for him. He licked his lips and leaned closer, lifting his free hand to grasp at Hannibal’s shirt.

“Your scent on me,” he said, his voice coming out honest and much huskier than he’d intended. He might have recoiled in embarrassment, had this been a few weeks prior. His words appeared to be appreciated, however, because the hand at his back pulled him closer and Hannibal gracefully leaned down, enough to let Will press his jaw against his. Will’s hand tugged on Hannibal’s shirt as he dragged his skin across the alpha’s, relishing in the slight stubble he found there, and felt like static electricity flickered through the space between them as he slowly pulled back - somehow feeling both satisfied and hungrier for Hannibal’s touch all at once.

He leaned back enough so that he could look into Hannibal’s face, his grasp on the white t-shirt still firm enough to keep the alpha close to him. The air around them was intoxicatingly heady with their mingling scents now and Will found himself wanting to press closer again, lick Hannibal’s mouth open, beg for the hand that rested on the curve of his tingling spine to move further down, grab him, touch him, *claim* him-

Hannibal’s eyes pinched slightly and Will noticed the pupils rapidly dilating, shrinking to pinpricks, and then dilating again. The alpha released a controlled, albeit shaky, breath.

“Calm down,” he said quietly, and Will wasn’t sure who he was talking to. “There’s time. I’m here. Slow down.”

“Why?” Will managed, feeling almost drunk on Hannibal’s scent and proximity now. Frustration coursed through him when Hannibal gently, but firmly, placed his hand over the one Will had on his shirt to soften its grip.

“Because,” Hannibal said, throat moving as he swallowed, and Will’s gaze lingered at his Adam's apple. “There are things that need to be discussed first.”

Will gritted his teeth and forced his hand to let go of Hannibal’s shirt, feeling bereaved and restless when the alpha leaned away from him. He took a series of deep breaths, urging his body to steady itself, and rested against the kitchen counter. Hannibal turned his attention back to the frying pan. Will still couldn’t quite make out how Hannibal was feeling about his presence. The fact that the man hadn’t asked him to leave was a good sign, he thought. But the tension in the alpha’s body remained and Will wanted desperately to soothe it, have those shoulders relax under his touch.

In tandem with his grip on reality returning to him, Will gradually came to accept that Hannibal was right. Things needed to be discussed. Things needed to be said. The wounds hadn’t magically healed just because Hannibal’s cum had been dripping down Will’s stomach less than an hour ago, mingling with his own. Hannibal’s hand on his dick, Hannibal’s thumb

dragging lazily over the head, milking it of its last few drops…

That's not helpful, brain.

Will forced the arousal down. It took considerable effort, but he managed.

Once he was stable enough, he turned to lean his back against the countertop, grasped onto the edge of it with both hands and tipped his head back slightly to release a deep sigh. A dull throb made itself known at the base of his skull. Will could withstand this. He could withstand the discomfort of being patient, because Hannibal was within reach. This would not end with him drifting into the darkness, alone and unconscious on his sofa, hugging a whiskey bottle to his chest for comfort. He had his anchor now.

Will reached a hand up to press his fingers into his forehead and knead away some of the tension that was building up there - god knows from what, exactly. The many consecutive days he'd spent attempting to drink his anxiety away, perhaps. The onslaught of emotions he'd experienced in the past few hours. Or the preheat relentlessly demanding his, and Hannibal's, attention. Or all of it combined.

"Will?" Hannibal's voice carried a slight sharpness of concern. "Are you alright?"

"Headache," Will mumbled, managing a weak smile to the alpha. "Nothing major, don't worry."

At that, Hannibal's jaw ticked. His gaze, now stern, wandered down Will's body in a way that had nothing to do with lust, before turning back to the stove.

"You've lost weight."

Will blinked at him before glancing down at himself. He may have lost a few pounds in the past few days - he couldn't remember having prioritized food. Jack Daniels had been potent in dulling the pain rumbling in his gut.

"Perhaps a little." Will glanced back at Hannibal. Took in the way the alpha now held himself even more rigidly than before. There was something almost too controlled about the movements he made as he stirred the meat and vegetables in the pan.

"You look unwell," Hannibal went on, not taking his eyes off his cooking this time.

Will, who'd just admired his own much improved complexion in the mirror, couldn't help the surprised scoff that escaped him. He didn't think Hannibal was trying to offend him, the tone of his voice was too matter-of-factly, too neutral for that, so what on earth was he trying to say?

"... Yeah," he said begrudgingly, because he really couldn't argue. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited. Hannibal turned the stove off and placed the frying pan on a potholder.

"And yet you tell me not to worry," Hannibal continued eventually, tone chilly and mildly

irritated as he reached into a cupboard to retrieve two small plates.

“That’s…” Will trailed off and hesitated as he watched Hannibal set the plates on the kitchen island before reaching for the frying pan again.

The air around the alpha was agitated, but there was something else there, too. Something Will couldn’t articulate, but *felt* . Like a gentle tug at his instincts, a soft whisper in his ear.

Will took a seat on one of the barstools next to the kitchen island, where a steaming plate of bacon and various bites of vegetables was now waiting for him. His mouth immediately watered. He was hungry. The bowl of soup Alana had prepared for him a few hours earlier had not been enough to make up for his recent utter disregard for his body’s need for fuel.

Hannibal took a seat on the stool across from Will’s, but rather than tucking into his own serving, he leaned his elbows on the countertop, clasped his hands together and pressed them to his mouth. Intense brown eyes locked with Will’s. Hannibal waited.

Again, the soft whisper.

He needs this. Let him care for you.

Will picked up the fork next to his plate and took a bite. The bacon was perfectly fried, just crispy enough, and the mild flavor of the zucchini balanced it out. Astonishing, really, that Hannibal was able to turn such simple ingredients into something so delicious. Or perhaps Will found it this exquisite simply because it had been prepared for him, by Hannibal.

Another gentle tug on Will’s nerves. He took another bite. Sighed with enjoyment.

Hannibal picked up his own fork. They ate in silence. Will, who now truly felt the consequences of letting cheap whiskey subdue his hunger for the past few days, finished first. He waited for Hannibal to swallow his last bite.

“Thank you,” he said then, putting as much warmth and affection into his words as he could. Hannibal’s gaze locked with his again, and to Will’s immense gratification, his shoulders seemed to loosen a bit. His facial expression remained unrelentingly somber, but there was a hint of relief in his eyes now.

“When was the last time you ate?”

The question made Will pause for a moment. There was nothing casual about the way Hannibal asked this. No mild exasperation that would likely be followed by a rueful but ultimately affectionate sigh, the way Alana would have asked. No, there was something raw in Hannibal’s voice. Anger? Accusation? Worry?

“This afternoon… tomato soup,” Will said, immediately deciding to be honest, because he really couldn’t summon the strength to lie to Hannibal at this point - didn’t *want* to lie to Hannibal at this point - but still found himself unable to hold his gaze as he continued. “But that was probably the first real meal I’ve had in days.”

“There are bruises under your eyes. You look like you haven’t slept in a week.”

Still, that unreadable tone of his voice. Like something was seriously off. Will winced inwardly. Lying about this would’ve been so easy. And yet.

“Does passing out drunk count? Because if so…”

Hannibal grumbled some words in lithuanian that Will strongly suspected were various curses and collected the empty plates. Will couldn’t even blame the alpha for his bad mood. If Alana hadn’t found him earlier that day, Will honestly wasn’t sure he would’ve made it through the week. It was terrifying to consider. And it made him feel deeply ashamed of himself. He looked over at Hannibal, who had his back turned to him as he rinsed the plates off, discontent and unease practically oozing off of him.

“Right. You’re upset with me,” Will eventually uttered, when Hannibal didn’t turn to face him once the plates had been dried off. His pulse hammered in his throat. “I understand that.”

“Do you?” Hannibal’s voice was still and worryingly quiet. He still didn’t turn to face Will, but Will could see his hands tighten into fists on the countertop.

Will swallowed tightly. Guilt crashed around in his chest as he watched Hannibal’s back rise and fall with each deep breath he took. But he did understand.

Memories flashed before Will’s inner vision. Chicago, night, lobby. Sebastian and Bruce. Nectarine. Weighed words, calculated steps.

There were so many things about that interaction, so many unspoken things that happened in the span of a few seconds, and so much Will had come to understand from witnessing it.

And he’d learned that there were so many things he had to *unlearn*.

Aside from having left Will with the firm understanding that his very nature was essentially that of a whore that needed to be constantly shackled and suppressed, John Graham had made sure his only son also understood something very fundamental about alphas.

Alphas weren’t just the apex gender; they were leaders, decision-makers, always reliable. Never wavering. Never weak. Never insecure. You went to an alpha to seek comfort and security; *never* the other way around.

By God, Will’s father was an idiot.

Granted, those ideas would eventually come to be eclipsed by Will’s own experiences and assumptions about aforementioned apex gender as he reached adulthood, but still. There were apparently several things Will needed to unlearn.

“*He needs you just as much as you need him.*”

Alana's words played like a recording in Will's head as he carefully made his way off the barstool. She'd insisted on that, as a way to motivate Will. But in addition to being a much-needed peptalk, those words had helped solidify something that Will had already started putting together.

It wasn't simply that Will had hurt Hannibal by rejecting him and telling him he wasn't needed, which really *was* a truly degrading thing to say to one's alpha.

It was this; Hannibal had needed him, too.

Will wasn't just his omega; Will was his partner. Will was his *anchor*.

And he'd not just abandoned Hannibal - he'd discarded his own sense of self-perseverance in the process. He'd shown up looking sick and disheveled, begging for Hannibal's forgiveness and his touch and his scent, without providing any real comfort - any real security - in return.

What kind of partner was he?

He thought of Sebastian again. The controlled straightness in his back as he carefully waited for the right moment to approach his mate. The deceptively relaxed stance. The confidence he inspired, the safety he provided. The way Bruce had melted against him, as if the weight of the world was suddenly lifted off his back.

"I know I messed this up," Will said, opting to stay by the kitchen island, because Hannibal's turned back practically shouted at him to keep his distance. "And I know I look like hell. Last few days have been… rough. I wanted to see you so bad, I was losing my goddamn mind last week."

Hannibal didn't say anything, but his knuckles weren't white anymore. Getting somewhere, then. Will decided to be bold. He took a deep breath and continued, well aware that it could backfire.

"Hannibal… Do you feel as though my current state is somehow your fault?"

Hannibal's shoulders immediately tensed up again, the reaction so sudden that it had probably been impossible for the alpha to hide it.

"... Sometimes I forget all about your empathetic dexterity," Hannibal finally admitted, sounding tired. He turned around to face Will, arms crossing over his chest. Will stayed where he was.

"Yeah. Me, too." Will smiled humorlessly. "Which is convenient when I behave like an asshole. The kickback isn't fun, though."

Hannibal's eyebrows came together in a scowl. He regarded Will quietly for a few seconds.

"Seeing you like this," he said quietly, as if he struggled to get the words out, "pains me in more ways than I can explain."

“It’s not your fault.”

“You’ve been so close to your heat, I should have-”

“I’m the one who fucked up.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter!” Hannibal snapped, his voice teetering on a growl as he finally took a step closer to Will, the steely scent of anger rising in the air. “You just told me you’ve spent *days* without eating or sleeping, save for drinking yourself into an unconscious stupor, *alone* , I assume, in Wolf Trap! And you come here looking like you’ve been… And I cannot abide that, because I should have been there to make *sure* you ate! I should have made *sure* you slept!” Something painful twisted Hannibal’s features. “You’re my omega, *koks šlykštus* , and you’re in no condition to-... I should have gone to you. Regardless of what you said to me that day.”

Will stayed put, marveling at the sight of Hannibal. He’d never seen the alpha so visibly upset before. Hannibal had been annoyed, dismayed and even hurt - but this was new. There was raw, angry concern glowing in those wide eyes, agitation rippling through his shoulders, and hesitation in the way he kept himself a few steps away from Will.

This anger isn’t directed at me.

Will held onto that knowledge and kept his voice calm when he spoke.

“You respect me too much for that.” He took one deliberately slow step towards his alpha, but no more than that. Took in the tightness around his eyes, the five o’clock shadow on his jaw. Hannibal never let his emotions get the better of him. More to the point, he never allowed himself to lose control. The fact that he now appeared to struggle with this, ignited a spark of worry in Will. “Hannibal, when was the last time *you* slept?”

Hannibal simply stared at him for a beat, still with shadows of anger darkening his eyes, but apparently stunned silent by Will’s question. It only confirmed Will’s theory. The alpha’s body was rigid with stress - the kind that came from forcing oneself to stay upright for far too long. Will knew that stress like the back of his hand. He needed to do something. Anything to chase that stress away.

Will wasn’t sure if he’d made any conscious attempt to emit his potent pheromones as a response to his alpha’s distress, or if it just… *happened* . But he knew it did, even if he couldn’t pick up on his own scent in the air. Because of the way Hannibal’s breath seemed to catch briefly, a sharp inhale through his nose. And then because of the way Hannibal’s shoulders lowered, fists uncurling at his sides. Most of all, because of the way the tension drained out of his face, smoothing the scowl out. Hannibal reached one hand out to support himself against the countertop, and brought the other one to his forehead with a tired sigh.

With three swift steps, Will situated himself right in front of the alpha, and carefully placed a hand on Hannibal’s elbow. He waited for the alpha to lower his hand, granting Will space, before gently pressing himself against the taller man, resting his forehead against Hannibal’s

shoulder - deliberately letting the fabric of the bathrobe slip down ever so slightly, leaving his neck naked and exposed. He breathed in the bergamot, felt it tug at his nerves and vaguely registered the lazy flicker of heat in his groin, but made no further moves.

Eventually, to Will's immense relief, a strong arm came around his shoulders. Fingers caressed gently at the sensitive skin of his nape, sending a shiver down his spine. They stayed like that for a minute. Breathing together, relishing in the closeness. The unspoken relief. The mending bond.

"Sounds to me like we're both in desperate need of some shut-eye," Will eventually mumbled against Hannibal, already feeling a bit drowsy from the comfort and the warmth of the man.

"Yes," Hannibal relented, voice still a little rough around the edges. "I think some rest might be wise. If not an urgent necessity. I seem to be… out of sorts."

Will immediately felt the twinge of guilt, the sting of regret, as he contemplated just how selfish he'd been. How his actions had affected Hannibal; the way his self-centeredness had pushed the alpha to the brink of whatever emotional turmoil he'd only just caught a glimpse of just now.

"I do not want you going back to Wolf Trap tonight," Hannibal continued, voice quiet but firm. Will shook his head against Hannibal's shoulder.

"Me neither."

After a few more seconds of comforting silence, Hannibal dislodged himself from Will - who immediately found himself craving more of the man's warmth - and gestured towards the hallway. Will followed him without a word, heart pounding heavily in his chest.

He'd been so confident just now, in his mission to calm and comfort and repair what had been damaged between them - and so sure that he enjoyed, to an almost alarming degree, having Hannibal close to him. But now that the idea of spending the night together was about to become a reality, Will couldn't help the anxiety knotting in his stomach.

Intimate touching was one thing - and honestly, it was still a fairly *new* thing - but *sleeping* next to the alpha was another. Leaving himself so unguarded, so vulnerable, letting himself slip into complete relaxation - even if he did trust Hannibal - was a strangely frightening notion. And what guarantees were there that his panic wouldn't suddenly erupt, like a very belated aftershock, and put further strain on the precarious thread between them that they were only just starting to tie back together?

So when Hannibal stopped in front of a dark mahogany door and swung it open for him, declaring it to be the guest bedroom, Will immediately experienced a very confusing wave of conflicting emotions. It began in relief, was followed up by worry, and ended somewhere in the area of bitter disappointment.

"Sleep should be our priority," Hannibal said, apparently having regained some of his

normal, infuriating aloofness. But when he continued, there was a withdrawn edge to his voice. “We have important matters to discuss tomorrow.”

Will flushed slightly, dipped his head with a nod and made his way over to the neatly made bed, where he took a seat with a sigh. Frustration coursed through him, as well as the ghosts of his arousal, but Hannibal was probably right. Said alpha regarded him calmly, leaning against the doorframe.

“I will sleep better, knowing you are at least under my roof,” he added, gaze locking with Will’s. Almost as if he was silently warning him not to suddenly bolt in the middle of night. Which seemed like an absurd notion, but given recent events and discoveries, Will couldn’t really blame Hannibal. He was able to keep the frown off his face and gave the alpha another nod.

“Yeah. I hear you.”

Hannibal stayed by the doorframe, appearing to weigh his words.

“If you need me,” he said, “I’m just down the hall.”

With that, he left. Will stared at the empty space that the alpha had just occupied.

… Just down the hall.

Will swallowed tightly and shook his head, attempting to clear himself of the anxiety building up, the intense longing for Hannibal’s proximity and the frustrated hunger for touch and scent he felt churning in his gut.

He could handle this. What was one more night?

At least he was under Hannibal’s roof. Where Hannibal wanted him. Even if Hannibal was, at the moment, acting less like himself. Less like Will had… hoped. He frowned in contemplation and looked around. The guest bedroom was just what you’d expect; neat and tidy and elegantly decorated and entirely impersonal.

Anxiety crawled over his skin, causing a sensation like pins and needles, because even though he was still in Hannibal’s house and the alpha hadn’t asked him to leave, Will couldn’t help feeling like he’d been pushed away.

Will stretched out on top of the duvet, put his hands under his head, and stared up at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to pull him under. They had things to discuss in the morning. Will would talk and he’d explain and he’d *fix* this. But first, he would sleep. He really was so, very, tired.

Hannibal shifted slightly on his mattress, throwing a glance at the alarm clock on his nightstand. Almost a full hour had passed, and sleep had yet to come. Which was bizarre, seeing as he really was exceedingly tired. He hadn't fully realized just how tired he really was, until Will had addressed it. The past few nights had been torturous, he'd only managed to drift off for an hour here, and hour there, before ultimately stirring awake, feeling restless, irritated and - worst of all - strangely incomplete.

But to think that the fatigue would have such an unseemly effect on him…

Hannibal had never raised his voice to Will like that before. Rarely raised his voice like that to anyone. It had left him feeling raw, unsteady and, as much as he hated it, *seen* . The mask had slipped. It was entirely accidental, of course. But even before it did, it was as though Will had peered right through it, identified the core of Hannibal's distress, and pulled it out into the open. Like he'd reached into Hannibal and torn out a bloody organ for the world to see.

Like he'd read Hannibal's mind.

" *Sometimes I forget all about your empathetic dexterity.* "

It was true. Hannibal hadn't prodded much at Will's empathetic skills lately. His focus had been entirely elsewhere. Now that he'd been reminded, it inspired a fair amount of… caution. Statistically speaking, most omegas were talented in tuning into how other people felt and reacted to things. But even amongst omegas, Will stood out in that respect.

And it seemed as though Hannibal was turning transparent right before Will's very eyes. The closer they got, the easier it seemed to be for the omega to look past the shields Hannibal put up. He couldn't let Will look too closely.

Hannibal was accustomed to being the one looking. He was definitely *not* accustomed to being seen. It was unsettling.

He hadn't really lied before. They did need to prioritize sleep, and they did have important matters to discuss in the morning. Hannibal had questions and he intended to have them answered, finally. He imagined things would go smoother, if they were both well-rested.

An entirely pragmatic, reasonable excuse to put some minor, temporary distance between the omega and himself. But it was just that, he knew. An excuse. Because for the first time in many, many years, Hannibal felt…

Vulnerable.

But he'd be lying to himself if he said he didn't regret the decision to put Will in the guest bedroom now.

Sleep would not come, despite the aches in his body, the stress in his muscles and the strain in his eyes. His head was heavy against the pillow and, being a trained psychologist, Hannibal knew every breathing-and-relaxing exercise in the book. Nothing worked. It was as though his body, the treacherous thing, kept reaching out for something that wasn't there.

It had taken every ounce of his already brittle self-control to resist Will's command before. He wasn't sure Will had done that on purpose. But Hannibal had felt it clearly. The omega's furious tug on his senses, setting his nerves on fire and pulling at every hungry instinct in his body, and it had made Hannibal want to press Will up against the kitchen counter and take him right then and there. Go further than they had before. What happened in Hannibal's hallway after Will turned up and told Hannibal exactly what he'd needed to hear, was rushed and desperate and *intense* and it had ended much sooner than Hannibal would have preferred.

The aftermath of that encounter had been a confusingly emotional ordeal, and once Hannibal actually took in the state of Will, it had triggered a series of old, stored-away, locked-up instincts that Hannibal hadn't ever expected himself to bend to. He'd known he was *protective* , yes. He hadn't realized how deep that went.

And that was just it. The source of Hannibal's torment. The *unpredictability* . The fact that Will *did* things to him that he couldn't foresee. The fact that where Hannibal once had the upper hand, Will had gradually gained power over him that Hannibal found increasingly and acutely challenging to resist. It made him question everything he knew, everything he *was*.

It had been exceedingly difficult to draw the line at letting the omega rub up against him in pursuit of his scent. The fact that Will hadn't quite smelled like himself at the time was most likely the only thing letting Hannibal stay somewhat in control. Will had carried the aroma of Hannibal's Molton Brown body wash when he emerged after his shower.

But the way Will's scent had swiftly intensified and caressed him after Hannibal's inelegant outburst, sudden and rich and so damned calming, had been enough to take his breath away.

It had almost startled Hannibal. Not because he hadn't been *aware* that omegas harbored such talents, but because it was the first time he'd been on the receiving end of it. And it had effectively pacified him, *instantaneously* . It was like he'd been hit with a tranquilizer. A damned narcotic. He'd stood no chance. Sugary, warm caramel. The rich undertone that reminded Hannibal of whiskey. Sedative, seductive, soothing.

The anger had practically melted out of him, before he'd had the chance to dig his claws into it and hold on. It was like a storm had just passed through him, leaving behind a chafed, grudging kind of calm. And then Will had been there to press up against him, letting Hannibal breathe in more of that intoxicating scent.

Will's unmarked neck. Naked and smoothe and open for Hannibal to touch, if he pleased. And by God, Hannibal pleased. He wanted to do more things to that neck. Hannibal wanted to suck and lick and bite. There had been a little mole there, right in the bend between Will's neck and shoulder that looked ever so inviting.

Take. Claim. Mine.

Animalistic instincts. Hannibal was well aware, and he was well aware there was very little he could do about them. He'd always felt like he was somewhat in control of them, however.

Predator. Socialite. Hunter. He'd leaned into that. Hell, it had been a point of pride.

"Don't worry. I won't lose control. Never have-"

"-Never will. Right. How do you do it?"

"Resolve and practice. You'll get there."

Hannibal wasn't sure resolve and practice would be enough to withstand this for much longer. The scent of caramel and cinnamon and whiskey was still heady in his mind and only seemed to be getting stronger the more he tried to ignore it. He could practically taste it.

Hannibal closed his eyes resolutely. Breathed deeply through his nose.

But soon his eyes snapped open again, gaze darting straight towards his closed door.

Caramel. Whiskey.

It wasn't just a stubborn, delectable memory - the scent really was intensifying around him.

A soft knock against the dark mahogany confirmed it. Hannibal steeled himself. Willed himself to regain some semblance of the self-control that used to come so effortlessly to him, dragged a hand through his hair and left his bed to open the door.

Will refused to meet his gaze. For a little while, they just stood there, in a silence that wasn't quite as comfortable as the one they'd shared in the kitchen earlier. Hannibal noticed the redness gathering at the tips of Will's ears, the shiver in his shoulders. Clung to his self-control like a drowning man to a life raft. Decided to break the silence, lest they stand there all night.

"Did you need something?"

"I-" Will's voice came out hoarse and he cleared his throat before lifting a pair of stormy blue eyes to meet Hannibal's. Eyes that appeared to see through *anything* . "I can't sleep."

Hannibal gritted his teeth, pressing his molars together so tightly they might break at the sight of the omega. The scent of caramel, absolutely fucking *mouthwatering* .

"I'd be happy to make you some tea." Even to Hannibal, the suggestion was ludicrous. He might have laughed, if the situation wasn't so uncomfortable. Will's eyebrows came together slowly.

"You're not sleeping either," he said, a defiant edge to his voice.

"... No," Hannibal begrudgingly admitted.

"I don't want tea."

The scent intensified further and Hannibal felt his self-control waver. It was getting dangerously thin. Will searched his gaze, eyes practically glowing with hunger and need and something akin to misery. Hannibal felt as though something literally yanked him forwards.

Another command. Christ, he's getting good at those.

"What *do* you want?" Hannibal heard himself ask - heard the challenging tone in his own voice, felt his instincts prod at him.

You can withstand this. You're the one in control.

Will's face suddenly twisted into something that looked like a pained snarl.

"Really? You're going to ask me what *I want*?" He took a bold step closer to Hannibal, glaring at him now. "After these past two weeks? After what happened today? After *everything*? You know precisely how difficult it's been for me to get past that, and now you're going to deny me? Tell me to *calm* myself? Is this my *punishment*?"

Will's voice had risen towards the end, breaking at the last word. The omega was angry, and *hurt* , and Hannibal realized that yes - he had made a mistake.

And Hannibal should've known. Should've realized. His wounded pride and the uncomfortable awareness that Will had seen something in him he hadn't actively chosen to share had made him want to keep the omega at arm's length, at least for the night. Like a beast retreating into its cave to lick its wounds before returning to the hunt.

He'd wanted time to recuperate, recalibrate.

But what Will just said took priority over whatever sorry excuse Hannibal had carefully designed for himself earlier.

He'd worked so hard to get Will to lower his guard - to embrace who he was, to embrace the things he *wanted,* to discard the shame he obviously struggled with for wanting those things - and tonight, after such a profound breakthrough, Hannibal had…

Idiot. Imbecile.

Before Will Graham stumbled into his life, Hannibal never thought of himself in terms of stupidity, thoughtlessness or oversight. It just hadn't been in his nature to be self-deprecating, and honestly, he never had a reason to be.

Now, at this very moment, he most certainly did.

Hannibal reached out, brushing his hand through Will's hair. Soft, shiny, from the shower. Will breathed in sharply, breath hitching. He averted his gaze as he lifted an unsteady hand to Hannibal's wrist. Moved Hannibal's hand, and placed it just where the bathrobe parted at the center of Will's chest. The skin there was warm. Hannibal could feel Will's pulse hammer rapidly beneath his fingertips.

“You *know* ,” Will said, words coming out hesitant and husky, “what I want.”

Will’s command pulled him over. The alpha stretched within. Filled him up like fine liquor, hot and heavy. Pure, unadulterated *demand* tore through every vein in his body, pooling and heating in his groin. And the alpha could be so very cruel.

“Say it,” Hannibal said, slipping two fingers beneath the bathrobe and relishing in the instant reward of Will’s breath catching in his throat. “And I might oblige.” He reached out with his free hand and grasped onto Will’s hip, pulling the omega closer. The air between them now hot with the scent of caramel and bergamot and growing arousal, resulting in something like burnt sugar, and Hannibal’s mouth watered. It was a miracle he hadn’t just shoved Will down on his mattress and devoured the man.

But even as his blood boiled and his teeth ached from wanting to sink them into Will’s soft skin, Hannibal didn’t want to rush this time. This time, he was going to savor it. Take his time. Make the omega weep.

“Touch,” Will managed, reaching up to cling to Hannibal’s shoulders, pressing his frame to Hannibal’s, “me.” The omega sucked in a breath of air before he continued, voice coming out a rough whisper. “ *Please*.”

Hannibal obliged by gripping his hips more firmly, one hand snaking down to grab tightly at Will’s ass, the only thing keeping his fingertips from slipping further into the cleft being the terry fabric of the bathrobe. A hitched moan escaped the omega. Hannibal steered them towards his bed, never breaking the embrace, until he sat down at the edge of his mattress, keeping Will standing in front of him. The omega swayed a little on his feet, so Hannibal kept his hands on Will’s hips to steady him.

“Take off the robe,” he instructed, suddenly feeling far more focused and steady than he had before Will had turned up at his door. It would have been easy, of course, to simply open the robe up himself and pull it off of Will’s shivering form. But he wanted to see. He wanted to push.

Will swallowed audibly and untied the belt holding the robe closed. With agonizingly shy movements, he let the fabric fall open. *Burnt sugar. Whiskey.* Hannibal slipped his hands beneath the robe and repositioned themselves on Will’s naked waist as the omega shrugged the garment off, leaving him naked save for a pair of black boxers. They did very little to hide the omega’s arousal; the bulge straining tightly against the fabric, as well as the damp spot forming at the top of it, made Hannibal’s own cock swell in immense approval.

He dragged his hands up and down Will’s sides, leaned in to press his tongue and lips against shivering abs. Will’s skin tasted almost feverish; hot and sweet and a hint of saltiness. Hannibal deliberately avoided the area he knew Will longed for him to touch. Knew being forced to wait would drive the omega to the brink. Just where he wanted him.

“What a sight you are,” Hannibal murmured as he leaned back, hitching his thumbs under the hem of Will’s underwear and starting pulling it down, even slower than Will had discarded

his robe. Will sent him a suffering, desperate look. His hands reached out to clamp down onto Hannibal's shoulders - not to stop him, it seemed, but for something to hold onto. When the boxer finally slipped down far enough that his dick sprang free, Will released a hitched whimper that made Hannibal momentarily pause to steady himself.

"Just look at you," he marveled. Will's stiff cock was twitching slightly under Hannibal's gaze, head already indecently glossy with precum, begging for the alpha's touch. And the alpha wasn't so cruel that he'd dismiss this beautiful call for attention. Once he'd gotten the boxers off of Will entirely, with his left hand firmly gripping Will's hip, he brought his right hand to Will's groin and wrapped his fingers loosely around the weeping shaft. Will hissed, fingers digging further into Hannibal's shoulders. When Hannibal stopped moving his hand, Will sent him a look that was almost furious with frustration, eyes dazed, pupils blown.

Hannibal suppressed a satisfied smile and maneuvered Will to take a reluctant step back, giving Hannibal enough space to pull his t-shirt off. Will's eyes raked greedily over his naked upper body, but didn't move until Hannibal reached out a hand to him.

"On my lap," Hannibal said, pulling Will close. The omega immediately averted his gaze at Hannibal's command, cheeks burning with embarrassment, as he placed one knee on Hannibal's left side and lifted himself up to get his other knee into position before he sank down on Hannibal's thighs. Hannibal was promptly filled with a sense of pride in his omega. It was a daring, intimate and vulnerable position for Will to be in, especially since he was nude, whereas Hannibal still wasn't. "Take my cock out."

Will very visibly tried to suppress a shiver and planted his hands on Hannibal's chest for a moment, before letting trembling fingers travel down to the hem of Hannibal's flannel pants and carefully slip past the fabric. The feel of Will's warm fingers brushing against his erection forced Hannibal to clamp his hands down on Will's waist once more. Will pushed the fabric further down and wrapped careful fingers around Hannibal. He swallowed again, throat clicking as he gave the organ a gentle, experimental tug. Hannibal felt himself stiffening further at the touch.

" *Fuck* ," Will breathed, seemingly transfixed on the sight of Hannibal's larger dick in his hand, his own erection momentarily forgotten.

"Keep going," Hannibal husked, hands keeping Will firmly in place. Will encircled Hannibal's shoulders with one arm for leverage, while his other hand slid up and down Hannibal's dick, finding a pace, and for a few seconds, they were both content watching Will's efforts. Hannibal noticed, with a surge of hunger, the way a string of precum dribbled down Will's neglected erection. The omega didn't seem to notice. If he did, he didn't say anything about it - completely engulfed in his task. But Hannibal wasn't about to let the omega go unattended for long.

He let his hands travel south, skimming over Will's lower back - earning himself a quiet gasp from Will - before they settled on Will's buttocks. Once he let his middle finger trace the cleft, Hannibal didn't try to stop the appreciative hum that left him upon finding the slick wetness there; the evidence of Will's longing to eventually be taken by him. The omega stiffened briefly on his lap, hand slowing down. Hannibal leaned forward to press his mouth

over one of Will's nipples, which perked up under his administration. Above him, Will let out a broken moan.

"Do you know how exquisite it is," Hannibal said, voice rough and full of praise as he looked up at Will, whose face was glowing pink with lust, "to have you this wet and eager for me?"

Will stopped breathing altogether for a moment, eyes widening at Hannibal's words. He opened his mouth, as if trying to speak, but couldn't. Hannibal covered the hand that had stopped moving on his dick with his own and gave a slow, firm pump.

"Can you tell?" Hannibal held Will's gaze, and the omega seemed unable to look away, while Hannibal's middle finger slipped between Will's cheeks and carefully traced the slick entrance. Will regained his ability to breathe and hissed through his teeth as Hannibal prodded gently against the opening and was awarded a hungry quiver. "You want me inside."

"... Yeah," Will admitted - a quiet, strangled, *desperate* sound - and took a firmer hold of Hannibal's dick, reassuming his assignment with new-found focus.

The hitch in Will's breath as Hannibal's finger breached the clenching opening and slid inside was followed by a whimper so utterly *pleased* that Hannibal came dangerously close to losing his composure. The hand on his dick picked up speed as Hannibal's finger slid out, and then pushed back in again. Again, and again, and again. And when he carefully added a second finger, once he'd determined that Will was relaxed enough, Will writhed against him and released a high-pitched, breathy moan that sent a shudder through Hannibal's frame.

"Don't stop," Will pleaded, pushing back against the fingers as they went further inside him and released Hannibal's shoulder to reach for his own weeping dick, which had now left a little pool of slick precum on Hannibal's flannel pants. But before he could grab himself, Hannibal took a firm grip on his wrist and held it to the side.

"I'll say when," he informed, pushing a third finger into Will and watched the omega arch his back beautifully at the increased stretch. He rocked his hips to bring attention to Will's hand, which had ceased its movements yet again. "Continue."

Dazed and glowing, Will kept going, hooded eyes locked onto his hand moving effortlessly over Hannibal's now slippery cock. Hannibal's finger dug deep inside of Will and twisted, hitting a spot that forced a ragged gasp from him. Will's arm strained in Hannibal's grip. His dick jerked helplessly against his stomach as Hannibal's fingers kept thrusting into him. Will's forehead pressed against Hannibal's as he closed his eyes and started pushing back more vigorously, broken pants leaving him as pleasure appeared to rise within the omega.

"Exquisite," Hannibal said again, voice coming out strained from the intense sensations washing over him, "that I can make you come undone from *this* ." He gave the omega a wolfish grin and a particularly harsh, almost violent thrust with his fingers that had Will snap his eyes open and stare into Hannibal's. "Imagine how you'll feel once I fuck you."

With that, Hannibal let go of Will's wrist and wrapped his hand around Will's twitching, slick dick. It took no more than two firm tugs, and Will lost it. His head snapped back in a silent

shout as ropes of cum splattered over Hannibal's chest, ass clamping down almost painfully around Hannibal's fingers in orgasmic spasms, and in the mindless bliss that followed, the omega undulated greedily against Hannibal, riding out the waves of satisfaction coursing through him. The sight alone was enough to make Hannibal join him and fall over the edge with a deep, guttural groan.

Will eventually stilled, and slumped against Hannibal. Soon, trembling arms came up around Hannibal's shoulders and hot, wet lips pressed kisses of worship along his nape, his neck and his jaw. Their mouths found each other and Will parted hungry lips for Hannibal, letting their tongues meet in a soothing postlude. Hannibal carefully slipped his fingers out of Will, stroking his hand affectionately over the omega's ass before settling it on the man's hip. Will broke the kiss and leaned back to look at him, dazed wonder still present in his blue eyes.

"Holy fucking shit," he mumbled, lips a bit swollen, a reddish hue of afterglow and satisfaction present in his cheeks. Hannibal gave his omega an appreciative, proud look.

"My thoughts exactly," he said. Will blinked and seemed to come back to his senses somewhat, because he sent Hannibal a mildly amused look.

"Except you'd put it in far more eloquent terms."

Hannibal smirked at him, pressing his fingers firmer into Will's hips.

"I think you'll agree that I can be rather crude when the situation calls for it."

Will huffed out an unsteady, quiet chuckle and rested his palms against Hannibal's nape, pressing their foreheads together with a content sigh. Intense affection welled up in Hannibal at the closeness and he found himself rubbing comforting circles over Will's hips with his thumbs.

"I'm not panicking," Will pointed out, voice raw and tired.

"So I see."

"I was worried… That what happened before was a fluke," Will admitted and sent Hannibal an unreadable look. "Irrational, maybe. I was scared that I'd just get my hopes up and then… have it crash around me. And that I'd let you down. Again."

A shadow of remorse dragged across his features and Hannibal lifted a hand to his nape, thumb tracing Will's jaw.

"We don't have to dwell on that right now," he said. "You're here. I've got you. And we can talk more tomorrow."

Will nodded gratefully. Then he yawned and let his body slump heavily against Hannibal.

"Tomorrow sounds terrific."

Hannibal gave a low chuckle and dragged a comforting hand up Will’s spine.

“Will. We need to shower.”

Will froze, leaned back and glanced down between their frames to find the evidence of orgasm drying tacky on their stomachs. He cleared his throat.

“Right.”

Will’s cheeks reddened slightly as he climbed off of Hannibal, slightly unsteady on his feet, and picked up the discarded bathrobe to cover himself up. Hannibal smiled knowingly at the omega and followed him to the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, Hannibal held the duvet up for Will, who crawled in next to him. Will once again smelled mostly of Hannibal’s body wash, but Hannibal was content in knowing it wouldn’t stay that way. He tucked his arm underneath the pillow Will would be using, and Will, now dressed in a clean black t-shirt and dark blue boxers that were too big on him, tucked himself hesitantly against Hannibal, clearly unaccustomed to this particular brand of closeness, but braving it all the same. The nervous tremor in his shoulders soon ebbed out.

Three minutes later, they were both asleep.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed. I promise next chapter isn't going to be just smut. They're 'actually' going to discuss stuff. Will is 'actually' going to say things. And yes - there's 'actually' still a murderer out there.
I just felt it was... entirely NECESSARY... for our guys to have some quality one-on-one time. Don't argue.

Leave a comment to let me know what you think, and I promise I'll try to hurry up with the next few chapters.

Fury

Chapter Notes

Long one, buckle up. :)

(Oh, and I just wanted to let you know that several earlier chapters have been revised (ch 1-19). Some more than others. I sincerely hope you'll enjoy the updated versions, should you choose to re-read the story from the beginning. But you don't 'have' to; I have not altered the main plot in any way - everything should still make sense.)

To those of you who are still here: thank you for all your support. <3 And I'm sorry I'm so shit at replying to your comments; please know they mean the world to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- Eighteen years ago -

Will Graham peered out the dusty window of his bedroom and took in the sight of the SUV parking outside the house. It was an old thing, the color a muted orange, with the tattered decal of an eagle on the front door. He knew that car, even though it'd been almost four years since the last time he saw it. He heard the creaking of heavy feet against the old floorboards below his bedroom, which was located on the second floor. He heaved a sigh and pulled a t-shirt on before leaving his room to descend the stairs.

When he got to the first floor and headed towards the entryway, John and Robbie were already hugging and slamming their fists against each other's backs, the way they did - the way alphas in his family did. Will wondered if he'd be slamming his fist against his dad's back like that one day. He crossed his thin, tanned arms over his chest and regarded the older men for a moment, leaning against the wall. Robbie finally took note of him.

"Will?" He grinned widely at him and stepped away from John. "My word, look at you, kiddo! You've grown! Hardly even recognize you! Practically a man already, huh?"

"Hi, uncle," Will forced a smile despite the relentless headache he'd been suffering for the past couple of days and made an effort not to grimace as a large hand clapped him heavily on the shoulder. "Good to see you."

It wasn't a lie. It was good to see uncle Robbie in their entryway, because uncle Robbie only ever came by when it was time for his and John's regular fishing trip. It'd been an annual thing once, but then Robbie had been deployed and sent to the other side of the Atlantic. It was only a few months ago that he'd returned, and he looked slightly more rugged than Will recalled. He didn't even recognise the scent coming off him. That happened sometimes, with

family members you hadn't seen in a very long time. John beamed at his brother, though, and Will was glad. His dad had mostly been moping around, irritable and grouchy, for weeks. Which, in turn, made Will irritable and grouchy.

"It really is so good to see you, you ugly old bastard!" John grinned and Robbie punched him in the upper arm. Will resisted the urge to roll his eyes at them.

'God, just *leave* already.'

Three days they'd be gone. Off camping somewhere next to some lake, sleeping in tents, most likely getting drunk together every night, battling mosquitoes and spending the days competing over who was going to catch the bigger fish. To Will, all of this sounded like an actual nightmare - but he knew they enjoyed it. And he was happy for them. But most of all - he was happy for himself, because this meant he'd finally be left alone. For three. Whole. Days.

He needed the reprieve. He needed it badly. Ever since Will's summer break began and he's started spending most of his time in the house, his dad had been getting on his fucking nerves and Will suspected the persistant headache was a result of that.

He helped them pack the car. His dad glanced over at him, scratching the back of his neck.

"I left you some money on the-"

"I know," Will sighed, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. Things were still a little tense; they'd practically been at each other's throats just hours before Robbie showed up. "Have a good time, yeah? I'll be fine."

Oh, yeah. He was going to be so very fine.

Will had a long list of things he was planning to do once they were gone. Take long showers without worrying about the warm water running out. Finish off *all* the vanilla ice cream and then go into town and buy himself some more. Read without being bothered every five minutes.

One of the things on his list tugged more relentlessly on his nerves though; he was going to steal one of his dad's beers and stay up late to watch a specific late-night broadcast he'd never, *ever*, had the balls to watch with his dad in the house.

Because there was an itch building up under his skin, and Will was nothing if not eager to learn. He was sixteen; boners naturally came and went, and Will had tried things out, but there was still much to be explored. Especially since he'd yet to present as an alpha. Maybe porn was the answer. Maybe it'd *do* something for him. He knew it did something for John. Otherwise Will wouldn't have heard him turn that channel on so often - though always late nights, when John probably thought he was sleeping. Sometimes, if Will listened very carefully, he could hear faint sounds coming from the TV. Moans that sounded high-pitched and needy, and it had… made him curious. It was a matter of research, he told himself.

Maybe it would even *trigger* something. It'd be about damned time. Not for the first time, Will wondered if the fact that he hadn't presented yet was the reason John was so grouchy. Like it was Will's fault he was a late bloomer. Unlike Connor in Will's grade, who'd presented as an alpha two years prior and immediately started acting as though he was some big fucking deal. And Will probably hadn't helped curb his arrogance, what with him following the guy around like a shadow. He couldn't help but to be fascinated by his classmate, dickhead that he was, and he certainly wasn't the only one.

Several kids in Will's grade had presented by now; and they'd all been betas, which wasn't terribly surprising. They seemed to defer to Connor, naturally drawn in by him, like bugs to a flame, and it was an intriguing spectacle to watch. Will had been sticking close, desperately hoping Connor's alpha hormones would somehow trigger Will's own. Like they'd rub off on him or something. The way Connor's campfire smell had sort of lingered on his upper arm after they sat next to one another on the bus that one time their class went to visit the museum in the next town over. It had made him feel *something*, so Will thought it'd been worth a shot. Which was why he'd taken every chance he got to 'accidentally' bump into Connor in the corridors, or 'inadvertently' brush against Connor's discarded gym clothes while the dude was in the shower after their PE class.

So far, nothing. Very disappointing.

Realistically, and statistically, Will knew that it was possible he was a beta. But it was challenging to concede to that knowledge, when his dad was an alpha, and his uncle was an alpha, and *their* father had been an alpha. Will's mom had been a beta, sure, but her older sister was an alpha. So was Will's cousin, Michael. So he felt he couldn't be blamed for still holding out hope, even though he was still on the thinner side, and didn't have the shoulders Connor did, nor the lingering campfire smell. Will didn't know *what* he smelled like. He hoped it was something like fire, or moss, or the scent of chopped wood. His uncle had smelled of sweat and the ocean. Will's dad smelled nothing like that. Will couldn't actually pinpoint what his dad smelled like; it was as common and familiar and unnoticeable to him as his own scent was.

At the very top of Will's list, however, was napping. Will wanted to sleep, undisturbed, for however long he pleased without his dad yelling at him to wake up and make himself useful. Lawns needed to be mowed - even though they were in a heat wave that had left the grass looking dull and yellowy - errands needed to be run. Will hadn't been allowed to enjoy his summer break at all. But for the next three days, he'd enjoy it to the fullest.

It didn't take many minutes after the two alphas left, before Will found himself curled up in bed again, drifting off to sleep.

It was a restless sleep, though. He had confusing dreams about school and Connor and grass that started burning, and when he woke up several hours later, his head still pounded. Fuck, it was practically worse than it had been before. He felt aggravated. Sore and stiff and so goddamned *irritated*. And because he knew what helped his dad when he felt aggravated, Will went downstairs, into the kitchen, and grabbed himself the beer he'd promised himself earlier. It was already dark outside, and Will went to sit on the couch, sipping almost aggressively from the can.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered to himself and pressed his fingertips into his throbbing temple. What the hell was wrong with him? Was he seriously going to get sick? *Now*? He finally had some time to himself, and he was falling ill? Typical.

He sank down further into the cushions and decided that at the very least, he was glad he was alone. Glad to not have the constant presence of his dad tugging at his senses, even when they weren’t in the same room. It was as if his whole being had been zoned in on the fact that a family member was close-by and it had made him exceedingly uncomfortable; like he’d wanted to crawl out of his skin.

Was it not typical of alphas to get a little bit unreasonable and aggressive when another alpha invaded their territory? Was *that* what was happening? There was a reason uncle Robbie never stayed in the house when he came to visit, after all. Maybe Will was finally approaching his presentation, and that’s what caused the grouchy atmosphere in the house?

Weirdly comforted by this notion, Will forced himself to relax, giddy with the idea that maybe, just maybe, it had all been leading up to this. Maybe his dad and uncle Robbie would return in a couple of days to find him a fully fledged alpha, ready to lead and be a man and slam his fist into their backs.

His gaze fell onto the remote control on the table, and Will reached for it, ignoring the way his head throbbed as he moved and sank back onto the cushions. He bit his lip briefly, before taking another swig from the beer can and turning the TV on with a resolute press of his thumb. Newscast. Wrong channel. He flipped to the next one. Then the next. And then-

There it was. Shit.

Will almost yelped when the porn came on, at a volume much louder than he’d anticipated, before he remembered that he was alone in the house and that it didn’t matter. Their closest neighbor was almost a mile away. No one but him would be able to hear this.

He took a calming breath at that and focused on the screen, heart still drumming away quickly in his chest. He cocked his head to the side as he took in the sight of a woman, who he thought looked beta-ish, lowering her head between the trembling thighs of another woman, who Will thought looked more like an omega. She was curvier. Looked softer. He focused on her. Focused on the way her breasts heaved, the sounds she made. Then he paused and closed his eyes, redirecting his focus to how he felt. Anything? Anything at all?

He pursed his lips and leaned back, wondering if maybe the beta woman’s presence threw him off. Will was a man, after all. Maybe what he needed was watching an omega actually get fucked. Whatever the beta woman was doing to her still seemed appreciated though. The omega spread her legs wide for her, whining as she undulated her hips, grinding her nether regions into the face of the other woman, who kept her hands on the omega’s inner thighs, making sure they stayed apart. Will took another sip from the can. It was… maybe just a little bit intriguing? His dick just didn’t seem to get the idea yet.

Yawning, he leaned back and watched lazily as the omega got off and the end credits rolled,

sultry music playing in the background. It didn't take long before another film began. Will quickly understood what the premise was; omega school girl and alpha teacher. Perfect. He sat up straighter.

A blonde omega stepped into something that was supposed to resemble a classroom, though there was only room for two small tables, two chairs, and a teacher's desk. She was wearing a plaid skirt and a white button-up that looked about three sizes too small for her, with the way her breasts practically burst through the buttons. She looked around idly, chewing bubble gum, before a tall man walked into the 'classroom'. He had a severe look on his face, wearing dark slacks and a white button-up of his own, with the sleeves rolled up. Big, muscular forearms. Will blinked. Those forearms made something inside him twist. Was it jealousy? His own arms were so thin.

"You know what you've done," the alpha told the omega, who gave him an exaggeratedly innocent look. "We don't take kindly to cheating at this school."

"Cheating?" She repeated, batting her eyelashes at him. "I would *never*, Mr. Dixon!"

Will snorted amusedly at the amply named character, but the laughter weirdly got trapped in his throat when the alpha towered over her, trapping her against the teacher's desk. Will's gaze followed, almost transfixed, the alpha's hand as it stroked up her thigh, between her legs, under her skirt. She gave a loud whimper.

"Don't lie to me," the alpha said sternly. "You want me to call your parents? Huh? Tell them what a nasty little cheater you are?"

"No, sir," she whined, spreading her legs wantonly for him. "No, please… Anything but *that*. My daddy will be so *mad*..."

"Then I'll just take matters into my own hands," the alpha said. "You need to be punished, right? Can't just let you off with a warning this time." His hand had started thrusting underneath her skirt now, and the omega let out a series of little moans.

"Yes, sir," she nodded, breathless and pliant in his hands, reaching up to grasp at his shirt. "I've been so *bad*..."

The alpha gave her a satisfied grin and pulled his hands out, holding his glistening fingers up to her. She turned her face away with a coy expression.

"You really have," he smirked at her, his voice weirdly hoarse now. Will swallowed. "But how is this a punishment when you're loving this?" He leaned in closer to her. "Maybe you need something bigger than my fingers to feel sorry for what you've done?"

With that, the alpha unzipped his pants and revealed the biggest cock Will had ever seen on another man. Far bigger than his own had ever been. And it only seemed to be getting bigger as the alpha stroked himself. Will's tongue darted out to wet his lips. As did the omega on the screen, he barely noticed. The alpha promptly lifted her onto the desk and grabbed her knees, spreading her legs wide.

“I’m going to fuck some sense into you,” he practically snarled, and reached down between their bodies to line himself up. The omega’s mouth dropped open as the alpha’s hips slowly drove forward. The camera angle changed then, providing Will with a startling close-up of the alpha’s massive cock sliding into the wet opening of the omega, and he shuddered. Will felt as though he was hypnotized by what he was seeing, entirely unable to look away, the beer can in his slackening hand forgotten. He barely managed to catch it before he dropped it on the floor, though some of the beer still sloshed out and landed on the carpet, and Will put the can on the table.

He grabbed a tissue from the box placed at the corner of the table and leaned down, frantic in his efforts to wipe the beer up, heart pounding almost erratically in his chest as the sounds coming from the TV riled him up in ways he hadn’t foreseen. When he finally looked back up, the pair had assumed a new position. The omega was now bent over the desk, hands firmly planted on the smooth surface for leverage, as the alpha fucked her from behind with harsh thrusts, muttering to her that she’d been a bad girl, that she needed to *learn*, but that she looked so good on his cock-

Will shuddered again. He felt weird. He tried focusing on the omega and the way she moaned for the alpha and apologized for cheating and please don’t call her parents and *yes*, she did love his cock. She loved it so much, in fact, that soon she seemed incapable of forming words. There were only moans. Short, sharp, high-pitched moans that seemed to egg the alpha on. Hips moved faster. One large, strong hand gripped her hip tightly whereas the other one came up to fist in her hair. The omega didn’t seem to mind at all. She threw her head back with a whine.

“Yes,” she gasped, suddenly regaining her ability to speak, “yes, please! Fuck me! Fuck-”

Will turned the TV off. For a minute or two, he just sat there, staring at the black screen. The air was thick in his lunges. He tried to analyze what he was feeling, but it was difficult when everything felt so hazy and blurry. He’d only taken a few sips from the beer. Was he already drunk?

No.

No, he wasn’t drunk.

Will swallowed tightly and peered down, feeling the tent between his legs before he saw it. He breathed harshly through his nose at the sight. Tried, desperately, to come to terms with what he felt. With the shock of the realization that had hit him just now, urging him to shut the damned TV off, as if that would *change* anything. As if it would reverse this. As if it had actually been the porn’s doing, and not something he’d been born with.

No. No. No.

This was wrong. This was all *wrong*.

He’d wanted to see. He’d wanted to picture himself in that alpha’s stead; he’d wanted to

imagine himself fucking into that omega girl, grip her blonde hair and hear her say she loved his dick. He'd tried so hard to picture it.

But that's not what had happened.

Because before he knew it, before he even realized it was happening, he'd pictured himself in *her* place.

Will pressed his lips together and tried to breathe calmly. He leaned back in his seat. Tried to ignore the way his eyes started burning. Tried even harder to ignore the new, foreign sensation of slick gathering between his ass cheeks.

Will really was presenting. Somehow, through the blurry haze, he understood that.

But not as an alpha.

Not even as a goddamned beta.

And suddenly, he'd give *anything* to be a goddamned beta.

Because Will was something else entirely. Something that hadn't even really occurred to him as a possibility. It was too rare. Too unlikely, what with all the alpha genes in his blood. Too unthinkable.

"Fuck." It came out a wet, broken whisper.

Will pressed his eyes closed and forced himself to stand up. His entire body shivered as he made his way up the stairs, stumbling with each step.

Maybe this was all a bad dream. Maybe he really was sick. Maybe he was coming down with some really fucked up flu that would explain why he felt the way he felt. Because he really did feel off. It wasn't just the sudden arousal - horrifying as it was. It was the way Will's skin itched, the way his breath stuttered in his chest as if the air wasn't welcome in his lunges. It was the way his vision blurred and his head throbbed. It was the frustration scratching him from the inside. Like he needed to vomit or scream or run or do *something*. It felt like losing his mind. It scared him. Scared him like nothing had scared him before.

Will curled up on his bed again, with a tired sob. He was shivering even more violently than before now. But his skin felt so hot. So fucking hot. So he undressed. Shivered some more. Got under the covers. Curled into himself. Somehow managed to drift off to sleep. Dreamt of Connor. Campfires. Hands gripping his hair.

He'd wake up some time later. Only semi-aware what was happening. All he knew was that his hands were in places they normally weren't. Doing things they normally wouldn't. And there was wetness. Wetness everywhere. On his sheets. On his hands. On his skin. And his skin was still so fucking hot. He'd cry. He'd touch. He'd find temporary release. He'd go back to sleep. He'd wake up some time later, and it'd repeat itself. It didn't stop. Nothing helped.

Wetness. Tears. Frustration. His skin was still. So. Fucking. Hot.

Sleep. Awake. Sleep. Awake.

Until all of a sudden, some time later - and Will couldn't for the life of him figure out how many hours had passed - he was stirred awake by something that finally, finally, made something inside of him hope for relief. Without thinking, without seeing, he reached out for it. Breathed in the scent of something that might help. Breathed in something that felt *similar* to whatever the fuck it was that he needed.

The scent of the ocean.

Strong hands on his hips. Harsh breaths.

An alpha.

Alpha. Alpha. Alpha.

Will felt like he really was losing his mind. He didn't know where he was. What day it was. What was happening. All he knew was that he longed so desperately for relief, for a way out of the hell he was stuck in, that he'd grab onto *anything*.

Fuck, yes. Please. Get me the fuck out of this.

Mere moments after he felt those hands grab onto him and offer him the promise of escape, there was tumult. Shouting.

A chair being knocked over. Very heavy steps running down the stairs. Cursing.

Fists being slammed. Not into backs.

A car driving away.

Some time later - and again, Will didn't know how much - a blanket was thrown over his naked, shivering body. The fabric burned against him.

"For god's sake," a tight voice gritted out, wavering with fury. "Cover yourself up. Snap out of it!"

Will managed to look up at that. The familiarity of the voice finally clearing some of the haze away, but he found no relief. His dad stared back at him from where he stood in the doorway, face twisted into a revolted sneer, hands fisted at his sides. And Will understood then, with startling clarity, what he *was*, and that his father *knew*, and that neither of them were good things.

It was a month later that John Graham put a rattling jar of pills down in front of Will at the dinner table, with a little more force than necessary. Will glanced up at his dad. John

wouldn't look directly at him. He never did anymore. His gaze shifted to the side.

Will turned his attention to the jar instead. Read the label. Suppressants. He'd known the day would come, but it still made something nauseated twist in his guts.

"You take them," John said, voice lowered and slightly trembling, as if he was holding back emotions. "You take them as often as you need to, and you never let anything like that happen again. You hear me?"

"Dad…" Will pressed his lips together, hated the way his eyes burned. Hated how he had no words. Hated how he hadn't been able to stop what had happened. Hated himself so fiercely that his skin ached. John sighed, before straightening up and backing a step away.

"Never let the harlot out, son."

Robbie Graham didn't come by to visit again. John didn't go fishing anymore. Will didn't bring it up.

It was a year later that Will had decided to move out, once he'd found a small room to rent. He'd told his dad it was because it was closer to school, and he'd be able to cover rent with his part time job at the video store. They both knew that wasn't why he left, but neither wanted to stray from the lie.

It was two years after that, after Will had been cornered by his alpha landlord and told that there were alternative ways for Will to pay his rent, that Will had decided to start taking the suppressants daily.

He'd move far away, apply to the police academy, falsify his documents, and spend the next fifteen years of his life living as a beta, working with the FBI, and trying desperately to run from his past and deny his true nature.

And he'd almost succeed.

When Will woke up the next morning, he felt so unbelievably well-rested and comfortable and *satiated* that it took him a while to understand he was not, in fact, stuck in some rarely delicious dream. He'd thought, as he'd stared at himself in the mirror the previous evening, marveling at the ease in his chest and the rosy hue in his cheeks, that he'd felt 'good'. But Jesus, it did not compare to how Will felt waking up now - slowly, lazily, in no rush whatsoever - to Hannibal's firm body right next to him, one strong arm thrown over Will's waist. The shared warmth beneath the covers and the scent of the alpha now clinging to his skin after spending so many hours closely tucked together made Will's head feel light and hazy. He didn't think it was only because he'd just woken up. Though he'd willingly admit he couldn't remember the last time he'd slept that well.

He glanced up towards Hannibal's face, curious to see whether the alpha had woken up, too. Hannibal had not. And it was both bizarre and heartening to find the older man looking so serene; the normally impenetrable mask of gentlemanly composure having slipped off entirely in his sleep, and there was only ease. Eyelids softly closed, eyebrows relaxed, lips just slightly parted. Will suddenly remembered with distinct clarity, as he gazed longingly at Hannibal's lips, the *words* that had spilled over them the previous night, and the effect they'd had on Will. Couldn't remember ever feeling so completely out of it, body tense and pliant at the same time, and unbearably aching with want. Not that Will was very experienced when it came to sex - or sexual arousal at all, for that matter - but the intensity of it had still shocked him. Was it like that for everyone? Outside of a heat? He had very few points of reference.

Shivering, Will turned under Hannibal's arm, tucking himself closer to the alpha briefly just to inhale the air around the man for a few moments. After denying himself the scent of Hannibal for weeks and now suddenly having free access to it, it was as though he couldn't get enough. He took a series of deep breaths, letting the bergamot and the green tea melt him from within, immediately noticing the tingling warmth lazily pooling in his groin. For a few moments, Will closed his eyes, allowing himself to simply enjoy it. He just felt so fucking *good*.

… It was actually starting to freak him out a bit. All of a sudden worried he'd lose himself completely to these new sensations, Will gingerly twisted back, away from Hannibal, and carefully slipped out from beneath the strong bicep.

He glanced back at the still sleeping man, fondness blossoming in his chest at the sight of him, and suddenly wondered whether it was a good idea to leave bed without first waking his alpha. Would Hannibal take offense if he were to wake up and find that Will had left his side? Will didn't think it terribly likely, but even this small possibility made him almost shudder in reluctance, seeing as they'd only *just* started mending their relationship - which, despite their earlier activities, he knew was still a bit chafed.

"*There are things that need to be discussed.*"

Will knew a conversation needed to be had - as much as he didn't particularly look forward to it - and didn't want to take unnecessary risks. Couldn't stand the idea of doing *anything* that might put a strain on them and find himself tumbling back into the lonely, suffocating, ruinous darkness he'd recently wallowed in. Gotten lost in. Thought he'd die in.

Fuck, he needed to send Alana a thank-you-note or something. She might have actually saved his goddamned life.

Biting his bottom lip for a second, Will climbed back onto the mattress and slid a careful hand up Hannibal's arm, heart skipping a beat or two as he watched the alpha stir slightly. Why the hell did *this* feel so intimate? After what they'd done the night before, Will didn't think it was reasonable to feel embarrassed or nervous about simply waking up together, but he did. There was something rather open and unguarded about the way Hannibal's eyelids slid open to reveal a pair of sleepy, coffee brown eyes. Will's heart clenched. His hand traveled on, making its idle way from Hannibal's bicep, to his shoulder, to his pec - vaguely mourning the fact that Hannibal was wearing a t-shirt. He longed for warm skin.

“Morning,” he said, keeping his voice hushed and soft, mindful of the fact that the alpha was still gaining his focus. Hannibal raised a hand and brushed his knuckles gently across Will’s cheek and jaw. The gesture was so tender and so seemingly *unplanned*, that Will suddenly found it a bit hard to breathe. He leaned into the touch, ever so slightly.

“Morning,” Hannibal said, voice husky and rumbling out of him. Will swallowed and sent the alpha a small smile.

“Sorry for waking you, I just…” he cleared his throat, suddenly feeling like an idiot. Like a lovestruck, overbearing idiot. “I'm just heading into the kitchen to make some coffee.”

As the words left him, and he *heard* them, he deemed it very likely that, yes; he’d made a stupidly big deal out of this. But Hannibal’s expression warmed as the unspoken implication sunk in. His eyes drifted closed again, while his lips curved into a knowing, tired smile.

“I appreciate the report.”

“Thought you might,” Will shot back, and it was meant to be a playful jab to hide how embarrassed he felt, but the tone of his voice still somehow came out so very soft and warm. “You want some?” He asked, and Hannibal mumbled something that might’ve been an affirmative before pressing himself further into his pillow. Will suppressed a smile at Hannibal’s obvious and weirdly endearing drowsiness. “I’ll be back soon.”

Although he was already wearing Hannibal’s too-large-t-shirt and boxers, Will wrapped himself up in the bathrobe he’d used the evening before, shivering slightly in the air of the bedroom, which felt much cooler against his skin now that he was no longer pressed up against Hannibal, and left.

He felt weird. He felt light-headed. He felt like he was walking on fucking clouds. And yes, he was definitely a little freaked out over it. But not so much that he ever entertained the idea of running from this.

“Are you someone who runs away, Will?”

Alana had asked him that the day before - which now felt like a lifetime ago.

Will *wasn’t* someone who ran. Not anymore.

Will wandered to the bathroom first, where he glanced at himself in the mirror before stepping over to the toilet to relieve his bladder. He *looked* much better, too. The dark circles under his eyes had been replaced by a mild pinkish puffiness, which admittedly made him look tired, or possibly like he’d been crying. But he didn’t look sick. He just looked like someone who’d been through a rough couple of days, which he felt he could live with, because that’s exactly what he was.

Speaking of sick; it suddenly struck Will that it was already the tenth.

Cursing silently under his breath, Will went out to the hall where his coat hung, and grabbed his cell phone from the outer pocket. After checking the time and finding, to his relief, that it was still relatively early in the morning, but not so early that doctor Nelson wouldn't have started her work day, he dialed her number and walked into the kitchen. She picked up after only two signals.

"Graham? Everything alright?" She sounded tense and worried. "Did it start?"

"No," he said, keeping his voice on the lower side. He didn't necessarily want Hannibal to overhear this conversation. "No, I'm fine. I'm calling because…" He trailed off, swallowing nervously. It felt weird talking about such intimate matters with a complete stranger. Discussing his induced coma had been far more clinical in that regard. A medical procedure, neat and clean and impersonal, even if the underlying factors were obviously deeply private and sensitive ones - which she'd likely suspected, given his abrupt departure once she'd steered the conversation into topics he hadn't been ready nor willing to discuss.

"What's the matter?" She asked, sounding calmer now, but there was still a mildly concerned tone in her voice. Will caught himself wondering if she responded like this to all her patients, or if him being an omega triggered something in her.

"I, uh," Will cleared his throat. "I have decided to spend my heat with an alpha, after all."

"Really? Graham, that's fantastic!" She sounded genuinely relieved. "I'm so glad you've changed your mind," she continued, and Will found himself yet again curiously wondering if the idea of an omega opting for induced coma rather than an alpha partner during a heat was uncomfortable for her. "I'll email you a list of our available alphas-"

"No." Will cut her off. "I already have a partner. I mean," he sucked in a breath, acutely aware of the fact that his skin carried notes of Hannibal's bergamot, and was glad for the fact that she couldn't see the flustered heat gathering in his cheeks. "I will be spending my heat with *my* alpha."

"Oh?" She sounded curious now. "*Your* alpha?"

"Yeah," he cleared his throat, tucking one arm around himself as he cocked a hip against the kitchen counter, feeling uncomfortably vulnerable and inexperienced.

"When you last came to see me, I was under the impression that you didn't have a partner."

"When I came to see you, we'd had a falling out. It's been recently resolved. We've been courting for a while, and I…" Will glanced up towards the doorway, making sure he was alone. "I feel safe with him."

"But you're not bonded?"

"... No," Will said, suddenly experiencing an odd sensation of prickling heat at the back of his neck, as images of Hannibal sinking his teeth into the skin there assaulted his inner vision. He shivered and pushed the feelings aside for the time being. "Is that a problem?"

“Well, it sort of depends. Do you think…” She hesitated only for a short moment, before heading straight to the point. “Are you serious about your partner? Have you discussed bonding?”

Will pressed his lips together tightly, suddenly feeling overwhelmed and very weak at the knees. He grabbed the kitchen counter with his free hand and took a deep breath through his nose. She seemed to realize he was dumbstruck by her question.

“I’m sorry, I realize this is very invasive,” she said, sounding genuinely sympathetic. “And normally, this really wouldn’t have mattered - being bonded is not a requirement for spending heat periods together. But Graham…” She sighed. “You need to understand that your upcoming heat is going to be *intense*. It’s likely that you’ll not be entirely in control of yourself, and that’ll affect your partner, too.”

“Okay?” Will frowned, hugging himself tighter as a knot of anxiety hardened in his guts. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that… bonding with a mate is an extraordinary experience. One that you wouldn’t want to forget about. It should be a conscious decision. And the act itself should, ideally, be saved for when you’re present enough to understand what’s happening,” she said, her voice having softened. Will imagined she probably knew what she was talking about, given her own bonded status, and said nothing. Didn’t know what to say to that. She went on.

“I think, given the intensity and - the instability - of the heat you’re about to go through, there’s a real risk you’ll end up accidentally claiming one another. You won’t be aware, Graham. You won’t be able to think straight. It could happen, and you could come out of it having bonded yourself to the alpha, and you wouldn’t even remember when it happened or how it felt.”

“Jesus…” He breathed, only half-aware that he was saying it out loud, and dragged a hand across his face. “I’m starting to think that induced coma might be the better option after all.”

“It’s *not*,” she said, voice suddenly very firm, her low alpha timbre vibrating through the words, and Will’s shoulders hitched upwards ever so slightly. When she continued, her tone softened into a more professionally concerned one. “That should only ever be the very last resort. If you do have an alpha partner, your heat should be spent with him. It’d be the far healthier option for you. But you just told me you recently had a falling out, and I just want to make sure you don’t end up bonding yourself to someone you don’t *want* to be tied to like that. Mating bonds are extremely hard to break, even between partners who don’t get along. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” he said hoarsely, because he did know. Bonding bites never disappeared on their own; they required surgical removal, and even then, one would have to go through years of therapy to overcome the psychological damage. And as much as Will found himself entirely and increasingly unable to resist Hannibal’s scent and closeness, he was acutely aware of the fact that he’d only known the man for a few months.

“Right,” doctor Nelson said, sounding ruefully sympathetic. “So you see my point.”

“What should I do then?”

“There’s… protective gear,” she sighed, clearly uncomfortable. “Essentially, you’d be wearing a collar that protects the glands in your neck. It’s obviously not ideal, but nothing about your situation really is.”

“Sounds like a chastity belt,” Will muttered humourlessly, mind wandering off to what he’d read about renaissance noblemen forcing their omega daughters and sons to wear heavy metal plates around their necks to protect their unbonded status, essentially treating them like livestock. It left a bitter taste in his mouth, even if he could clearly see why Nelson was suggesting it now.

“It sort of is,” she agreed. “But it could save you a lot of pain down the road. And it’s only until your heat is over, at which point… you and your partner could make a clear-headed decision together.”

“Right,” he said, mouth dry. “I hear you.”

“We have collars for patients to borrow,” she said, “and I think it’d be a good idea for you to come pick one up at your earliest convenience. Your heat is approaching quickly, after all.” She paused briefly, clearing her throat. “Now that you’ve overcome your falling out, I assume the two of you are being intimate?”

Will sucked in a breath, embarrassed warmth blossoming across his skin. He made the conscious effort to ignore the way some of that warmth gathered between his legs, because the idea of getting aroused just from having his doctor ask about what he and Hannibal did together was just too much.

“Is that… relevant?” He asked, and heard the unsteady waver in his voice. He closed his eyes in humiliation.

“It is,” she stated, matter-of-factly. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, but preheat is a precarious thing. I need to know.”

“... We are,” he finally muttered, turning around to lean his elbow on the countertop, chewing nervously on his bottom lip.

“Good,” she said. “Keep it up.”

“How reassuring to have your permission,” he grumbled irritably, still feeling raw and embarrassed.

“It’ll make the next few days easier for you,” she explained, now sounding ever so slightly amused. “Being close with your partner during your preheat will allow for the heat to rise *gradually*. It’ll be like running up a hill, rather than slamming into a brick wall.”

“Succinct analogy,” he scoffed.

“I know,” she said and he could practically hear the grin in her voice. “So, like I said, keep it up. Don’t hold back. Oh, and, *enjoy*.”

“God,” he sighed, bringing a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“It might actually earn you an extra day or two,” she continued, sounding thoughtful. “But I still think you should come pick up a collar as soon as possible. You’re not exactly on a precise schedule.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “I will.”

“I’ll talk to you soon, then.”

“Yeah.”

He hung up, struggling to calm himself down. There was a whirlwind of emotions tearing through him now, most of which were slightly overwhelming and not entirely comfortable. Everything just felt so *real*, all of a sudden. Like he was about to embark on something monumental and vast and frightening. Part of him still refused to believe this was happening. Part of him still cursed his biology, and wished he were a beta, so that he wouldn’t have to deal with all of this. It just didn’t seem *fair*, damnit.

But the bergamot on his skin tugged at his senses, and Will tentatively allowed for it to wash over him. It calmed. It soothed. The scent of his alpha. Everywhere on him.

Sucking in a strengthening breath, Will decided to stick to his plan to make himself and Hannibal some coffee, craving the fortifying caffeine even more now than he’d done before making that phone call.

After spending a minute or two figuring out how on earth Hanniba’s complex and expensive-looking coffee machine worked, Will leaned back against the kitchen counter with a content sigh, comforted by the gentle hiss of brewing coffee and the accompanying smell of it. He decided to take a seat on one of the stools, glancing idly around the kitchen. The first golden rays of sunlight made their way through the window, soaking the room in a warm glow. It felt odd to sit there alone; as if he belonged there. As if Hannibal’s kitchen was a place where he was welcome, and trusted to such a degree that he could waltz in, on his own, and make coffee, while his alpha lingered in bed just down the hall. A bed Will himself had shared with him.

Feeling warm and comfortably tender by these thoughts, Will’s lips curled into a soft smile. His gaze fell to a newspaper tucked under a small stack of envelopes towards the edge of the kitchen island, and Will reached for it. It was yesterday’s, but Will had been so deep in the trenches of his own misery and hyper focused on the specific details regarding the case he was so desperate to solve, he hadn’t been paying the news sites much attention lately.

His gaze darted across the front page, looking for headlines that particularly roused his

interests, until his pale blue eyes finally came to an abrupt halt at one of them. A small headline, but a headline nonetheless. His eyes widened as he read it, over and over, breath now coming in shallow puffs through his nose. With a rapidly deepening frown, Will flipped through the paper until he found the article - an opinion piece - so that he could read it in its entirety. Which he did. Several times.

It was astounding, really, the fickle nature of his emotional state. How quickly and unforgivingly it could turn on its heel and leave him reeling, grasping for stability and the chance to come to terms; find his balance. Yesterday he'd been clinging to a whiskey bottle as if it was his only salvation, driven half-mad with his own misery and self-pity; this morning he'd woken up feeling safe, well-rested and content in the arms of his alpha.

And now.

Now, Will's skin crackled satisfyingly with a rage so startling in its intensity that it made his stomach knot up in nausea, hands trembling as he held the newspaper up. His eyes, which felt as though they might start bleeding red at any second, took in the headline once more.

'Omegan arrogance - the true culprit.'

Hannibal wasn't sure exactly what it was that finally made him snap his eyes open, body tensing up as he was suddenly and seemingly unprovokedly dragged from the comfortable darkness of slumber. He only knew something tugged at him - no, it howled at him. The more aware he grew, the clearer his mind became, the louder it got. He sat up, dragged a hand across his face and glanced over at the empty spot that Will had previously occupied. He did dimly remember Will saying something about coffee, and when Hannibal sniffed the air he picked up on the fragrant notes that told him Will had followed through.

So what on earth was causing the ripples of agitation through the air?

Frowning, Hannibal left the bed, stepped into his slippers and tugged his bathrobe on, before leaving the bedroom in search of his omega. As he approached the kitchen, Hannibal paused briefly, taking a deep breath through his nose once more. He scowled thoughtfully. The agitation he felt carried a note of something Hannibal hadn't picked up on before. Through the mist of brewed coffee and the sweet scent of caramel was something else. Something angry; salty, almost coppery in its intensity. And with each step Hannibal took, the stronger that metallic scent got. It sent a mild but nonetheless exhilarated shiver up his spine. Will wasn't just agitated, he realized.

He finally reached the doorway leading to the kitchen and paused there for a second, taking the sight in. From an objective outsider's perspective, nothing seemed amiss. The coffee machine sighed one last time, declaring its job finished, and there was sunlight coming through the window. Will sat with his back to Hannibal at the kitchen island, shoulders rigid with tension. Tension which Hannibal immediately wanted to soothe away, as much as he

wanted to marvel at it.

He stepped closer and decided against speaking to signal his approach - Will would've heard him come in anyway. The slippers Hannibal wore made a soft scuffing sound as he walked carefully towards the omega. As he got closer, Hannibal saw the paper laid out in front of the younger man, and gritted his teeth. He had a nagging suspicion that Will might've caught sight of a particular article that Hannibal himself had read just the day prior. And it had aggravated him, of course, the way moronic opinion pieces often did. *That* one especially so.

But it wouldn't have simply *aggravated* Will.

Hannibal placed himself quietly next to his omega, opting to stand next to him rather than take a seat. Will's face, downcast and partly hidden from Hannibal, had an expression that was deceptively calm. Hannibal took note of the slight tick in the omega's jaw, and reached out carefully to place a hand on Will's warm nape, knowing full well he might lash out at him, but taking the chance anyway. Will didn't lash out. He merely stiffened briefly, the odd scent around him turning heady and magnetic. Hannibal glanced at the paper, the familiar headline confirming his earlier suspicion. He also noticed the way the edges of the paper were crumpled, as if someone had gripped them very tightly. Will's throat clicked once before he raised his chin.

"Have you read this?" He asked, tone dangerously soft, despite the roughness in his voice.

"I have," Hannibal said, keeping his own tone just as soft. "Idiotic drivel."

Will finally turned to look at him then, and Hannibal once again had to suppress the shiver that threatened to wreck him. The blue eyes, which were often shadowed by self-doubt and hesitation, shone electrically at him, so sharp and unrelenting that Hannibal could practically hear lightning strike down around them.

Will wasn't aggravated.

Will was *furious* .

Whatever it was Hannibal had seen in him all those months ago, when his interest in Will had first ignited for reasons Hannibal himself hadn't discerned until later, upon learning that Will was haunted by the pleasure he took in taking Hobbs down, seemed almost a pale ghost of what he saw in Will now.

Will's mouth curved into a dangerous, sarcastic smile, bordering on a sneer.

"Oh, I don't know. He makes a compelling case, don't you think?" He let out a husky, bitter laugh. "Had those omegas only thought to exercise a bit of modesty, none of this would have happened. Instead, they were walking around, showing off their unmarked necks without a care in the world, and not even deigning to suppress their scents…" Will shook his head slowly. "And expecting alphas to resist their natural instincts? I mean, it was all so very *arrogant* of them."

Hannibal tightened his hand on Will's nape, aching to at least steady his omega, if not chase away the fury entirely. Because seeing Will like this, was like staring into the face of a god. He felt a tug in his senses then. Something akin to a command from Will, but it was a jumbled one. It was as if Will was asking for something he himself wasn't able to define.

"Death seems almost an appropriate consequence, wouldn't you agree?" Will continued, voice having dropped to a low murmur that dripped with dismay. "I mean, we have to learn."

"People such as this," Hannibal said, keeping his voice at a soothing volume, and pointed to the author's name, "are the ones in need of learning."

"Do you think they're capable of it?" Will sighed, all of sudden looking so very tired. The pinkishness under his eyes took on a redder shade. "Learning, I mean?"

"I'll admit, I have my doubts," Hannibal replied casually, sidestepping the whole truth. "Perhaps the unfortunate truth of it is that idiocy is a human condition we won't ever be entirely rid of. Nor its consequences."

"Are those the objective observations of an experienced psychologist?" Will sent him a dark, stormy look. "Because the guy who wrote this travesty seems to be much more inclined to listen to your esteemed colleague, Chilton."

"If I could rid the world of his particular brand of idiocy, I would. But I'm afraid I've come across it far too frequently in my career, and have been able to truly help far too few of those who suffer from it." Hannibal gave Will a small, joyless smile.

"Then what do we *do* ?" Will's eyebrows came together in a scowl that looked both frustrated and endlessly mournful, despite the incredulous, wavering smile that accompanied it. Will stared at him as though he was genuinely searching for answers, like a religious man falling to his knees in prayer. Hannibal leaned down to nuzzle against Will's temple, his hand coming up to cup the omega's face in the process. Will's breath hitched slightly, but not in a way that led Hannibal to believe the touch wasn't welcome. The younger man tipped his head back, allowing for Hannibal to softly graze their jaws together. He then drew back slightly and looked calmly into Will's eyes.

"What we can."

Will still didn't look happy in the slightest, eyebrows still drawn together in a resentful frown, but his shoulders relaxed and his scent sweetened to such a degree that Hannibal was sure Will was calming down.

"Coffee's done," Will sighed, averting his gaze. "And for what it's worth, I'm angry on *your* behalf, too."

"Oh?" Hannibal stepped away from Will to take out two cups from the cupboard. He heard the rustle of the newspaper and glanced over his shoulder to find Will holding it up to him, eyes glaring.

“They’re assuming an alpha is behind those murders,” Will said. “And they’re making alphas out to be some kind of… mindless animals! *Helplessly* incapable of controlling yourselves and resisting the scent of an unmated omega, as if you’re all just… just…” He huffed angrily, slamming the newspaper back onto the counter and pushing it away from him with an offended sneer. Hannibal could practically see the anger rolling off of Will in steady waves, but was too heartened by his defensive fury to point out to Will that he’d harbored some misconceptions about alphas until rather recently, too. It was likely, he thought, that Will was already beating himself up over it.

“Like I said,” Hannibal offered his omega a calming smile and placed a steaming cup in front of him. “Idiotic drivel.”

Will let out a deep sigh, bringing a hand up to rub at his forehead, before reaching for his cup. He blew on it a couple of times before taking a sip, closing his eyes in contentment at the flavor. Hannibal took a seat on the barstool across from Will and brought his own cup up to his lips, sipping idly on the beverage.

“Sorry,” Will eventually grumbled, setting the cup aside to lean his elbows on the edge of the counter. “I didn’t mean to make a ruckus first thing in the morning. I really just… wanted to make you coffee.” He looked away with a frown, cheeks reddening slightly.

“And you have,” Hannibal pointed out and held up his cup, sending his omega a reassuring look. “I know how much this case means to you, Will. You’re allowed to ‘make a ruckus’ over it. It isn’t as if I haven’t seen this side of you before. I find your temper rather attractive - when it’s not directed at *me* .” Hannibal took another sip from his cup and pretended not to notice the flustered look Will sent him.

They said nothing for a minute, but Will eventually squared his shoulders in a way that led Hannibal to believe the omega had been gathering his courage for whatever was to come.

“There are things we need to discuss,” Will said, sending him a serious look, which Hannibal returned.

“Indeed.”

“There are things I need your help with.”

“I’ll be happy to oblige.”

“And there are things I’d like to tell you.”

“You’ll have my undivided attention.”

“First things first. You have questions, don’t you?” The omega swallowed tightly at that. “About me? About my… background?”

“I do.” Hannibal nodded, but kept his expression gentle. “But they come from a place of concern, Will. If you want me at your side - if you’d accept me as your alpha - there are

certain things I insist on. Such as having a firm understanding of who my partner is. Or we'll both get lost."

"A blind man cannot lead another one," Will said, voice now a bit subdued.

"Something like that," Hannibal smiled at him. "But it's not so much about me wanting to *lead* you. I want your trust. I want to be able to predict how you might feel and respond to certain things. When I fail in that regard, I feel myself destabilizing," he admitted, fingers tensing just slightly around his cup. "And it's extremely disconcerting."

Will stared at him, eyes wide and betraying an emotional inner turmoil that Hannibal ached to remove from him. The omega's shoulders tensed up ever so slightly before he spoke.

"You have my trust," he said, voice barely more than a whisper. "Ask me."

They gazed at each other for a few moments, letting the weight of what was awaiting them settle around them. Will looked pale, almost clammy, but he never averted his gaze from Hannibal's. Jaw firmly set, like a soldier heading for battle, and Hannibal - though he'd always suspected that was the case - knew then that the answers he was finally going to get had been weighing exceptionally heavily on Will's shoulders for god knows how many years.

He might break from this.

Hannibal would pick up the pieces. He'd lead them together, with gold, if that's what it took.

"You can do that, right?" Will's hesitant smile, that day in Hannibal's car, quietly asking for Hannibal to not let him shatter beyond what was reparable.

Hannibal leveled the omega with a look he knew conveyed all the support and safety he could ever hope to offer the man, and opened his mouth, words coming out of him in sure, calm syllables.

"What happened when you presented?"

Will's throat contracted once as he swallowed, lips twitching in withheld emotion, and he sucked in a sharp, unsteady breath.

And then, he told Hannibal everything.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed. :)

Talk

Chapter Notes

I didn't mean to make you wait this long - AGAIN - I was genuinely so psyched a few months ago when I decided "enough is enough" and to push past my writer's block, but it's been a rough couple of months, workwise. May-June tend to be difficult months for people in my profession.
And a month ago, right around the time I was really getting 'into' this chapter, my cat suddenly got very, very sick and the vet said there was nothing we could do. So I had to let her go. To say it fucking sucked is an understatement. She was with me for nine years - this is the first chapter I'm publishing without her curled up next to me on the sofa. You know? Fuck.

Aaaanyway. I'm really not trying to throw myself a pity-party. I just want you to know that I have legit reasons for being late this time. I know I've had a tendency to suddenly drop off the face of the earth only to suddenly reappear months later with bullshit excuses, and that's not what's going on here. I truly intend to work regularly on these last few chapters, and hopefully wrap it up before summer's over... Or at least before the end of 2024. I'm trying to be realistic here. ;)

Anyway, because my mind's been all over the place, there may be some slight tone inconsistencies in this chapter. It's also not been beta-read. (You guys deserve better, but this is the best I got right now. <3)
I really hope it doesn't bother you too much, and that you might still enjoy this chapter. Bit shorter than previous ones, but it still moves us closer to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will did come close to breaking. Dangerously close.

Hannibal caught the telltale signs of it even before the blood had drained from Will’s face, leaving it looking pale and sickly. Small droplets of cold sweat gathered in his temples and on his upper lip as he spoke, and there were several times, as he listened to Will talk about what happened that summer and caught all of these signs, that Hannibal caught himself *almost* putting his hand up to get the omega to stop talking.

Not because he couldn’t take it. He could. He *could*, damnit. As a therapist, this was hardly the first time Hannibal was forced to endure stories of omegas being mistreated.

It *was*, however, the first time the omega in question was one he cared for on such an intimately personal level.

And that… admittedly, made it a bit less tolerable.

But he wouldn't make Will stop. He wouldn't risk making his omega think Hannibal couldn't bear to hear this - that he might reject him for things that had been outside of his control.

Hannibal would take in every word; he would cradle Will's secrets in his arms and keep them safe there, and he would not allow them to weigh on Will's shoulders any longer. It wasn't just the alpha in him that demanded he do so.

Will eventually trailed off, apparently having told all there was to tell regarding his first presentation, and the events that led to his estrangement from his father.

A heavy, vibrating sort of silence settled between them. Will stared down at the table with a dark look on his face. When he eventually spoke again, it was with the mechanical tone of someone who was trying to detach himself from the words that left him.

"I would have let him take me, if my father hadn't stopped him. Stopped *us*."

Will absolutely refused to look at Hannibal, shoulders hunched and fists clenched together in front of him. His upper lip twisted in miserable aversion, as though he was reliving the memory, and Hannibal experienced the frustratingly futile determination to remove a pain from Will that had already been inflicted and left to fester for years. He took a long, controlled breath before he spoke, making sure to keep his tone hushed.

"You were a child going through your first heat - alone. You hadn't seen your uncle in years, you wouldn't have immediately recognised his scent. He might as well have been a stranger to you."

"Right, the saving grace in all of this," Will bit out, lips stretching into a grim parody of a smile. "He might as well have been a complete goddamned stranger, and I *still* would've allowed it. Hell, I would've welcomed it." He paused, lips thinning. "He wasn't a stranger, though. Even if I didn't realize that at the time. I don't think *he* fully realized it either. I never got the chance to ask. He left… and never came around again after that. I don't think they even spoke again."

"It wasn't your fault, Will."

"... I know."

The words were spoken with a grave sort of conviction that Hannibal hadn't expected. He regarded Will for a moment, looking for signs that the omega was lying - that he was only agreeing with Hannibal to put a merciful end to a difficult conversation.

"Do you really?"

"Yes, Hannibal, I do," Will said, fatigue roughening his voice. He closed his eyes, eyebrows coming together in a resigned scowl. "You may be the therapist here, but I'm not oblivious to

the workings of the human mind. And don't get me wrong - I did think it was my fault at first. But then..." Will's eyes shifted to the side. He looked, though it should've been impossible at that point, even more uncomfortable.

"Then… what?"

Will heaved a long, tired sigh - the kind that seemed to take all of his energy with it and he slumped against the table, bringing up a hand under his jaw to keep himself somewhat upright.

"I *know* that I was only sixteen, and it was my first heat, and that I wouldn't have been able to stop what happened. I know all of that. Okay? And in hindsight, I can rationally see that my uncle should've practiced some goddamned self-control. He was an adult, a trained fucking soldier, and yes, I am *angry* with him. But guilt isn't always rational, Hannibal. And while I don't blame *myself*, I do blame the omega."

"... What?"

Will's jaw worked for several tense seconds before he elaborated.

"It got easier to live with myself and what happened that day, if I distanced myself from what I was. I started thinking of my gender as this… *separate entity* that resided in me, that I needed to keep in check." A huff of joyless laughter left him, and he continued before Hannibal could comment on how archaic that sounded.

"Yeah. I know how problematic that is. And I'm not delusional. I've always *known* that I'm an omega. I never actually thought of myself as a beta, even after living as one for fifteen years. But... I couldn't handle the idea that what happened that day was my fault, and because my dad and my uncle cut ties after that, I couldn't bring myself to blame him either. Not then. I felt too shitty about the whole thing." Will paused to shake his head slightly, as if he himself struggled to make sense of what he was saying. "Eventually, I decided that it was *the omega's* fault. I started thinking of it as this… pathetic, corruptive, wanton little *thing* that had possessed me against my will and forced me to do things I didn't want to do."

Hannibal let out a slow breath, eyebrows coming together in a troubled scowl. So much of what Will had just told him made things click into place - even if the conclusion Will had reached in his younger years was one Hannibal vehemently opposed.

Will hadn't just disliked the idea of being omega; he'd been *rejecting it entirely*. Separating it from himself, as if it were a tumor; an unwelcome invasion of his body, not a part of *him*.

"I see," he said quietly. "And so… you decided to 'be' something else."

Will's jaw jutted out defensively while he weighed his words.

"My father told me to never let the harlot out, and I sure as hell wasn't going to."

"'Harlot'," Hannibal repeated, lips twisting in aversion. The word was bitter on his tongue.

“That’s what he called you?” Will shook his head, lips stretching into a dry smile.

“Technically, he didn’t. The *omega* was the harlot. My job was to keep it locked away. Don’t you see?” Will gave another joyless, awful laugh. “He inadvertently planted that seed. But boy, have I been watering it.”

Despite himself, Hannibal felt a sudden wave of frustration well up inside. It was one thing to have experienced traumatic events and being affected by those on a subconscious plane, and another thing entirely to embrace those effects *knowingly*.

“If you *understand* all this, if you understand the error in that line of thinking, why have you been-”

“Understanding something and constantly thinking about it, or *questioning* it, are different things, Hannibal. And I have spent the past decade actively *not* thinking about it.” Will’s voice rose in tandem with his agitation. “And as we’ve recently established, I’ve been buying into the stereotypes. You *know* I’ve had fucked up ideas of what it means to be an omega in the past. You think I’m not ashamed of it now? Because I am!”

Some of the fiery anger from earlier that morning glinted in Will’s eyes when he suddenly looked up to send Hannibal a defensive glare. He quickly looked away again, but Hannibal still felt grounded from the brief eye contact.

“To your credit, you’ve always been compassionate with other omegas.” Hannibal softened his tone before he went on, conscious of how his next words might land the wrong way. “Did you ever think of the murder victims as harlots? Given their gender, that is?”

Will looked stricken for a moment.

“... No. Never.” He shook his head softly, sounding almost relieved, as if this hadn’t occurred to him until just then. A wry half-smile tugged on his lips. “I guess I’ve been thinking of *my* omega as particularly troublesome. A bad egg.”

“Do you still think of it as a ‘separate entity’?”

Will hesitated, before giving a stiff shrug.

“There are times when I can still hear my dad’s voice in my head. Telling me not to let it out. Demanding that I suppress. It’s what kept me back when you and I have… been close.” Will cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “And I’ve been reinforcing what he said to me for well over a decade. I can’t just snap my fingers and reverse all of that. But I am coming to terms with it. With *it*, being… me.”

“I’m glad,” Hannibal said, letting gentle affection into his voice. “I wish your father had never planted that seed to begin with.”

Will sent him a tentative, rueful smile, one that was full of regret and bad memories.

“Not like he was the only one. Before I started suppressing on a daily basis, I ran into *several* alphas who… well, let’s just say they certainly seemed to share my dad’s sentiments. I know now that I’ve been generalizing, but like I’ve told you - it’s important to me that you understand that my aversion to alphas wasn’t entirely unwarranted.” Will said, sending Hannibal another defensive look - though it was less heated this time. “When I was eighteen, my landlord said he’d cut my rent in half if I agreed to be his bitch. I politely declined, and he *un*-politely broke my wrist and index finger before I managed to get away. I guess it was around that time that I decided to enter law-enforcement, and as I’m sure you can imagine, the things I’ve seen in my line of work haven’t exactly negated my opinion of alphas.”

“I *can* imagine that,” Hannibal conceded, hands curling into fists in front of him. “For what it’s worth, I never thought it was unwarranted. Only exaggerated.”

“These days, I’m inclined to agree with you,” Will said, tone softer. “And in many ways, I have you to thank for that.”

Hannibal focused on breathing for a few moments, as memories of a certain day not too long ago assaulted him. Will by the bookshelves. His defiant gaze. Hannibal’s total disregard for his obvious unease.

He’d apologized for that, yes, but had he truly understood just how badly that situation could have gotten out of hand? Had he understood how close he’d come to damaging Will in ways he’d never be able to truly repair? For all his years of research, for all his self-righteous bravado, for all his confidence in his so-called expertise in the omegan nature…

Could any alpha ever fully understand something like that?

“I’m not sure I deserve such praise,” Hannibal said, dropping his gaze to his clenched fists. “What I did to you that day, in my office… I cannot believe you found the strength to forgive me for that. Especially knowing what you’ve been through-”

“Yeah. You crossed a line, Hannibal,” Will said quietly. “And as you probably recall, I was pissed. I never wanted to see you again. But you came to me to ask for my forgiveness, you *admitted* to me that you were in the wrong, which is a hell of a lot more than my landlord ever did. Or my own family members, for that matter. I chose to forgive you, and to trust you, and I don’t regret that.”

Hannibal gave a curt nod, still struggling with the alien sensation of *shame* icing his veins.

“Here I’ve been preaching that I have omegas’ interests at heart, that you deserve to be treated with respect, and still I did something like that to you, simply because you rejected me.” He brought his hands up to scrub over his face, letting one hand linger across his jaw. “It’s deplorable.”

“Hannibal, I don’t think there’s anything deplorable about understanding and acknowledging that what you did was wrong. You’ve shown me more respect as an omega than my father *ever* did,” Will said, looking up at him with renewed fire in his eyes. “My presentation came as a shock to all of us. He watched me spiral afterwards. I have no doubt he heard me cry at

night, and I needed him to *accept* me and *support* me and tell me things were going to be alright… but all he did was throw a jar of suppressant at me. I moved out the year after that because he refused to even *look* at me. And he hasn't reached out to me since I left."

"Not once?"

"Not once." Will lowered his gaze again, but not before Hannibal caught the wet shine at his lower eyelids. "I may have watered the seed he planted in me, and I may have let things get out of hand with the suppressants… But that man treated me like I was tainted, and I believed him. Say what you will about my uncle - my *father* is the one who made me hate myself."

In the heavy silence that settled between them, Hannibal allowed hot, fresh fury to wash over him - along with mental images of what he might do to John Graham if the two ever crossed paths. The man wasn't even worth devouring. All Hannibal wanted to do, was to inflict as much pain as possible. Watch him suffer. Make him regret.

Will's shoulders suddenly gave a flinch, before he wrinkled his nose. Not in distaste, it seemed, but in surprise. He looked up at Hannibal with a tentative, uncertain look on his face.

"You're angry."

Hannibal blinked at him, feeling off-kilter at the sudden change of direction.

"Does that surprise you?"

"It surprises me that I can *smell* that you're angry." Will wrinkled his forehead. "It, uh… It's not my empathy. There's an actual *scent*." He lifted his chin and breathed in, before letting out a bemused huff. "Huh. Steel."

Hannibal fought the storm of old instincts that this triggered in him - to retreat, to attack, to block - and instead focused on calming himself down. Because despite the small part of him that found it unnerving to be deciphered in such a way, a much bigger part of him relished and warmed and ached from what Will had just told him.

"You've mentioned steel to me before."

"Yeah," Will breathed, still looking somewhat bewildered. "I remember telling you it wasn't always there. I never knew what it meant."

"Courting pairs learn to recognise emotion-based notes in each other's scents after spending a sufficient amount of time together. Being physically intimate helps, sometimes." He sent Will a gentle look. "It's thought to be a sign of compatibility."

Will stared right back at him now, eyes wide, astonishment and vulnerability flickering in the depths of them. He sucked in a brief, sharp breath.

"Ah. Right." He said, words trembling ever so slightly. "I should've… known. I mean, obviously I've heard of it. I just, um." He cleared his throat. "Never really thought I'd get to

experience it. Isn't it a bit-" He bit his lip. "Intrusive?"

"It can be," Hannibal conceded. "But it can also be solidifying, and a form of reassurance. Most commonly, the experience is a shared one. It's rare for only one party in a courtship to develop that sort of comprehension - though the speed at which one learns to interpret the other's emotional scent signals can vary."

Will hesitated for several seconds before swallowing thickly and opening his mouth.

"Sorry, I realize we've taken a bit of a detour here, but I just… Can *you* smell what *I'm* feeling?"

There was conflict in Will's expression as he asked this, anxious acidity in his scent, and Hannibal hesitated. What exactly did Will hope he'd say? Would it scare him? Would *he* find it intrusive?

In the end, Hannibal sent the younger man an appeasing smile.

"I've been alerted to your joy and contentment on a number of occasions. It sweetens you a great deal. Other notes are gradually becoming clearer, too. What you felt this morning, when you read the paper… That was new to me." He sent Will a more sober look. "It's what woke me up."

They regarded each other for a few fragile moments before Will shifted slightly in his seat, straightening his back.

"Can you smell what I'm feeling now?"

"I can," Hannibal admitted, breathing in a little deeper. "You're anxious. Is it because you noticed I'm angry?"

Will shook his head softly, brow furrowing slightly in his concentration.

"Somehow, I can tell when… Yesterday, you were angry at yourself. I knew, without really thinking about it. And right now, it seems you're angry… on my behalf. You smell, um, *protective*."

Small bursts of red colored Will's cheek at the adjective, and Hannibal soon picked up on the soft clove-like hints of surprised pleasure from the omega.

"You're not mistaken," Hannibal said, ignoring the vague awe he felt upon turning practically transparent before his partner.

"I don't know if it's my empathy that's letting me decipher the subtle differences, but… yeah. Holy shit." A short laugh, filled with wonder, escaped Will. "I never knew it could be like this."

Neither did Hannibal. And though he hid it better than Will did, he, too, felt somewhat

astonished by how accurately the omega was beginning to read him. Perhaps it should have worried him, considering everything Hannibal had worked so vigorously to keep out of sight. But it didn't. It only made him long for Will to remain at his side even more.

Still, there were final steps that needed to be taken.

"Are you anxious because of what you've told me?" Hannibal asked, effectively making Will freeze up in the midst of his amazement. The omega sent him a look that held a wide range of emotions. It made his scent confusing.

"I am."

"Why?"

"Because I've told you everything there is to know. I've shown you all the dirty laundry. And I hope you can see, now, why I've been… difficult. Why I've been fighting against this." He paused to send Hannibal a self-deprecating, sad smile. "I mean, we've come a long way, but honestly, part of me is *still* fighting. I can't guarantee that I'll ever truly stop. Try as I might."

"Do you honestly think I would reprehend you for that?"

"Perhaps not, but…" Will paused to take a trembling breath. "You asked me if I'd accept you as my alpha, but at this point, I think the real question is - would you accept me as your omega?"

Hannibal stared at the younger man for a moment, feeling slightly overwhelmed from all the instincts and emotions that were running rampant through his chest, before getting to his feet. Will slid off his own barstool, one hand grasping onto the counter as if he was afraid he'd run away if he didn't anchor himself somehow.

The sweet caramel scent emanating from him was very obviously soured by apprehension and uncertainty when Hannibal approached, and Will appeared to lose some internal battle with himself when his gaze dropped to the floor. Hannibal didn't say anything as he placed his palm securely against Will's nape, thumb brushing circles over Will's pulse point. It hammered rapidly under his touch.

"Will," Hannibal said, hoping the earnest fondness he felt came across to Will, either through his scent or his voice. "I need you to hear me when I say that you were *never* a harlot. And I'd consider myself extremely fortunate to have you by my side."

Rage and contempt still lingered in his system, spiking every few seconds, as soon as he let his thoughts stray towards Will's father, and the things he wanted to do to that man. But for the time being, it seemed his inner turmoil was dominated by warmth and reassurance and something Hannibal couldn't even name. Something that appeared to soothe Will, because the acidic apprehension lifted gradually from his scent.

After a few tense seconds, Will lifted his chin to look at Hannibal, eyes wide and reddening.

“‘Exquisite.’” Will breathed out, lips curving into a pale, unsteady smile. “That’s what you said to me last night.”

“It’s what you are,” Hannibal said, running his thumb along the line of Will’s jaw. The omega’s breath stuttered a little, expression tightening with pain, and longing, and hope, all at once. When he spoke, his voice was barely more than a whisper.

“I’ve never been called that before.”

And that was it. Hannibal had reached his limit. Pain and grief and something gloriously aching and *needing* tore through him, and Hannibal leaned down to press his lips to Will’s.

It wasn’t aggressive, or seductive, or a display of dominance, or anything *other* than the reassurance Hannibal desperately wanted to convey to his partner. It was a slow, warm brush of skin. It was a searing, comforting link between them. And when a soft, appreciative noise rose from Will’s throat, Hannibal cradled the sides of Will’s face with hands that were both gentle and firm.

Eventually, Hannibal felt Will’s hesitant hands settle on his waist. He shifted closer, encouraging the omega’s embrace, and Will’s fingers curled into the fabric of Hannibal’s morning robe, tugging their bodies together.

Once they eventually leaned away ever so slightly, just to look at one another, Will’s face had regained much of its color - now rosy and lush and glowing - and his pupils were slightly blown. But he didn’t drop his gaze this time. Instead, he looked right into Hannibal’s eyes with some odd blend of nervous assertiveness, before gently tipping his head to the side, presenting his naked neck and lightly stubbled jaw - silently asking for Hannibal to scent him.

A pleased shiver ran up Hannibal’s spine.

As he leaned in to grant his omega this additional comfort, relishing in how their combined scents mingled in his nose, he took the opportunity to speak. Softly. With a voice that was hoarse from emotion.

“I will remind you,” he murmured to Will, “that you are exquisite,” he brushed his lips to Will’s neck, “as often as I please,” he leaned back to search Will’s gaze. “And you will listen to *me*. Not your father. Not anymore. Understand?”

Will stared back at him, eyes darkening further as the air sweetened up around him. Hannibal drank it in like he was starved; rich, creamy caramel, and spice-sugary cloves. Undertones of burnt sugar. Will smelled absolutely *ambrosial* like this. His tongue came out once to wet his lips.

“Because you’re my alpha.” It came out sounding like a statement, but there was still a subtle hint of timid hesitation in Will’s gaze.

“Because I’m your alpha,” Hannibal confirmed, voice firmer now.

Will stared up at him, nodding slowly as he took the words in, before he leaned back in to rest his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder.

They stayed like that until the sun had risen high enough to bathe the kitchen in bright light, and the coffee that remained in the pot had gone cold.

Through heavy-lidded eyes, Will suddenly caught sight of the bright red digits decorating the front of Hannibal's stove and very reluctantly dislodged himself from the alpha. It was already getting close to nine, and as much as he enjoyed the situation he now found himself in, time was unfortunately of the essence. Hannibal didn't seem to particularly mind, as he looked down at him with a soft look on his face.

"Want me to make more coffee?" He asked, and the fondness evident in his voice made Will suddenly cramp up in nerves, because it suddenly dawned on him that there were, in fact, more things he needed to relay to the alpha. Uncomfortable things.

Still, he nodded, because he really could use the extra caffeine.

"That'd be nice," he said meekly, and watched Hannibal move back towards the counter where the coffeemaker was. While the alpha busied himself with preparing a fresh batch, Will tried to find a way to bring up his next topic without needlessly upsetting the alpha. Old wounds had just been poked at, and things felt… fragile. Good, yes. But fragile, the way something very good sometimes felt fragile simply because you were afraid of breaking it.

"You're getting anxious again," Hannibal suddenly commented, glancing at him over his shoulder. "What's on your mind?"

Will didn't know how long it'd take before he got used to this whole 'I can smell your feelings'-thing, but he definitely wasn't quite there yet. And so, feeling unnervingly seen and caught out, he blurted:

"I need to go to the hospital."

To Hannibal's credit, his overt reaction to this was much calmer than the one in his scent, which immediately shifted into something tangy and worried. The alpha turned to look at him.

"Why?"

"Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to just throw it out there-"

"I'm more interested in *reasons* , than in apologies," Hannibal said, stepping closer to look Will over. "Do you feel unwell? You look far better than you did yesterday, so I assumed-"

“I’m fine,” Will said patiently, reaching out to plant his hands on Hannibal’s forearms. “I didn’t know how to bring this up, but…” He grimaced. “Look, this is probably going to upset you, but I need you to hear me out. And let me preface this by saying, I’m *not* going through with it.”

“‘It’ being…?” Hannibal made a very gallant effort to appear composed, but the way his jaw ticked gave him away.

Will sent him a wary look, and quietly told the alpha about the arrangements he’d made for his upcoming heat. Hannibal’s scent flared up into something very similar to the metallic tang Will had come to recognise as anger, and this time some of it *was* , in fact, directed at him. He instinctively made his own scent take on a comforting, placating note.

“That seems,” Hannibal managed to - *very calmly* - say through gritted teeth, “a bit extreme.”

“And again - I’m not going through with it,” Will repeated slowly, searching Hannibal’s gaze. “You and I weren’t exactly on good terms, and I wasn’t about to spend my first heat in over a decade alone *and* awake.”

“There are other options,” Hannibal argued, more out of agitated alpha-stubbornness than anything else it seemed, and Will couldn’t help but to raise an eyebrow at that.

“Sure, my doctor said the same thing. She also offered to email me a list of available alphas.” He paused, letting his thumbs rub across Hannibal’s wrists. “I couldn’t stand the thought of it.”

Hannibal stared at him, still looking anything but pleased - but eventually, his body gradually relaxed, scent easing into something milder. With a sigh, the alpha stepped closer to rest his forehead against Will’s.

“I’m sorry you felt the need to take such drastic measures.”

“I’m sorry I made such a mess of things in the first place,” Will sent the alpha an exasperated little smile. “Not like being comatose was something I looked forward to.”

“And you’re not going through with it.”

“Obviously not.”

“Obviously not. Because…?” Hannibal’s lips curved into a soft smirk. Will blinked up at him, noticing the shift in the alpha’s mood, cheeks heating up in embarrassment.

“You know why.”

“Do I? Maybe you should clarify, just in case.”

“... You’re really going to make me say it?” He muttered, eyebrows coming together in

flustered annoyance.

“I think I’d like to hear you say it, yes.” The grin Hannibal sent his way was practically wolflike, and the air around him filled with the rich, heady scent of fresh bergamot. If there had been any doubts in Will’s mind whether Hannibal actually *wanted* to be Will’s partner for his heat, those were promptly disintegrated.

“Because *obviously*, I thought I might spend my heat with you.” Will cleared his throat and looked away, face aflame. “If you don’t mind.”

Warm, husky laughter left the alpha as he leaned in to press his lips against Will’s neck, hands coming up to rest on his hips.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Hannibal said against the skin just beneath Will’s ear, sending delicious tingles down Will’s shoulder, arm, and chest. “Especially when you’re being so polite about it.” Will scoffed, but it came out sounding soft and perplexed.

“Glad that’s settled.”

Hannibal let him go with a self-content smirk and headed back to the counter to finish loading the coffeemaker. “So why exactly are we going to the hospital?”

Will sobered a bit at that. God, would these uncomfortable-but-necessary conversations never end?

“I called my doctor this morning before you woke up to explain that my plans have changed. She seemed *very* pleased to hear that, by the way.” That earned him an amused hum from Hannibal. “But she thought it’d be a good idea for me to wear something around my neck for… uh, the act. So to speak. Seeing as it’ll be intense, and we… might accidentally end up, um. You know.” He sucked in a breath and pushed past the discomfort. “Apparently they got protective collars that patients can borrow, and she wants me to come pick one up.”

“Ah.” Hannibal flicked the switch on the coffeemaker and turned around, leaning back against the counter and crossing his arms over his chest. “I suppose that makes sense.”

Will nodded, taking a careful step closer to Hannibal. “I think so. Right? I mean, you and I… We’ve only known each other for a few months.”

Hannibal nodded at him, stretching out a hand to beckon Will closer.

“Absolutely. Better to take things slow,” he said, though Will thought he might’ve detected a bit of disappointment emanating from the alpha. The older man didn’t let any of it show in his gentle expression, and Will decided not to comment on it.

He took Hannibal’s hand and for a short while, they were content just standing there, listening to the coffeemaker produce its second batch of the morning. Will looked down at their joined hands and brushed his thumb softly over Hannibal’s slightly larger one.

“I’m not opposed to the idea of taking that step with you, you know.” Will spoke quietly, despite the way his lunges seemed intent on squeezing all the air out of him. “Some day.”

Hannibal’s hand tightened slightly around his own, tugging him closer to the alpha.

“Me neither,” said Hannibal, and the fresh-cut bergamot came back with a vengeance. Will’s head swam for a moment. God, he’d always enjoyed the way Hannibal smelled. But recognizing *this* particularly delicious note for what it was… That was a whole new level.

He swallowed, realizing his own scent was probably sweetening around him, if the way his cock stirred in the boxers Hannibal had lent him was any indication.

“My doctor seems like she knows what she’s talking about, huh?” He managed a crooked little smile as he looked up at his alpha, who returned the look with eyes that were notably darker than a short while ago.

“She does.”

“So you’d agree that we should take her advice. Yeah?” Was he leaning closer to Hannibal? Yeah. Yeah, he definitely was.

“That seems wise.” Hannibal’s lips curved softly.

“I’m glad you think so,” Will said, leaning in to nuzzle his nose against the area beneath Hannibal’s jaw. “Because she suggested some other ways for us to make this whole heat-situation a bit more manageable.” Already feeling uncharacteristically bold, Will stuck his tongue out to lap softly at Hannibal’s pulse point. Strong forearms wrapped around his waist, and the alpha let out an appreciative rumble.

“Did she now?” Hannibal sounded caught between arousal and amusement, and Will leaned back slightly to send him a little grin.

“Want to join me in the shower?”

Hannibal grinned back. “I think the coffee can wait.”

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

... I feel like I may have ended this chapter on kind of a mean cliffhanger. :/ Hm.

Honestly, at this point, they just need to work their shit out. You know? (We're obviously still waiting for Hannibal to put certain cards on the table, but whatevs. We'll cross that bridge when we get to it.)

Hope you enjoyed. :) We're definitely approaching the finale. (... And Will's heat. I just thought I'd mention it, in case you're mad at me for not including a steamy shower scene here.)

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